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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

2 Down...

2006 was surprisingly good for a transition year. As the Xbox 360 continued its next-gen reign, the Xbox and GameCube sank fast, while the PS2 literally went out with a nuclear explosion--not that it's even close to done--producing yet another bounty of instant classics such as Final Fantasy XII, Okami, and Yakuza, along with a pile of first-rate RPGs. Handhelds shone brightly too with scores of innovative new titles and a passel of classic sequels. It's hard to believe that '06 was just the tip of a very large iceberg that will be melting its way into our lives over the next few years.

2007's 360 exclusives alone are hard to fathom: Halo 3, Fable 2, Banjo 3, Crackdown, Kingdom Under Fire 2, Too Human, Mass Effect, Overlord, Huxley, Bullet Witch, Blue Dragon... what is this, the 90s? And the Wii still has a few big guns to fire off--among them Mario Galaxy, Smash Bros. and the next Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles. 2007 will also be the year of the beast; having seen what the PS3 can do with Motor Storm my Heavenly Sword obsession is at DEFCON 1. All this and the PS2 still has me by the cullions with Rogue Galaxy, God of War 2, .hack//G.U. V2, Tomb Raider Anniversary and the game I've waited 12 years, for which you'll find on our May cover. There's an epic PSP surprise in the offing too...can you say Dracula X meets Symphony of the Night? And Naughty Dog and Sucker Punch have yet to throw their hats into the PS3 ring. Last but not least, let us not forget the pageant of cross platform stallions in the gate, such as Bioshock, The Darkness, Golden Axe, GTA IV, Mercenaries 2, Metal Gear Solid 4, Turok, Indiana Jones, Assassins Creed and so on. They say it's going to be a hot summer. Looks like it may be hot all year.

We have few tricks up our sleeves to keep things fresh on the print side so, resolve to have the latest Play in the can all year... And if you're into movies, Rocket too, on sale now at a store near you! As corny as it may sound, the most profound single fact that I take away from 2006 is what amazing readers this magazine has. The more I get to know you—keep the letters and correspondence coming—the more I, and the entire staff, endeavor to make each and every issue of Play something worthy of your patronage. Here's to a great 2007.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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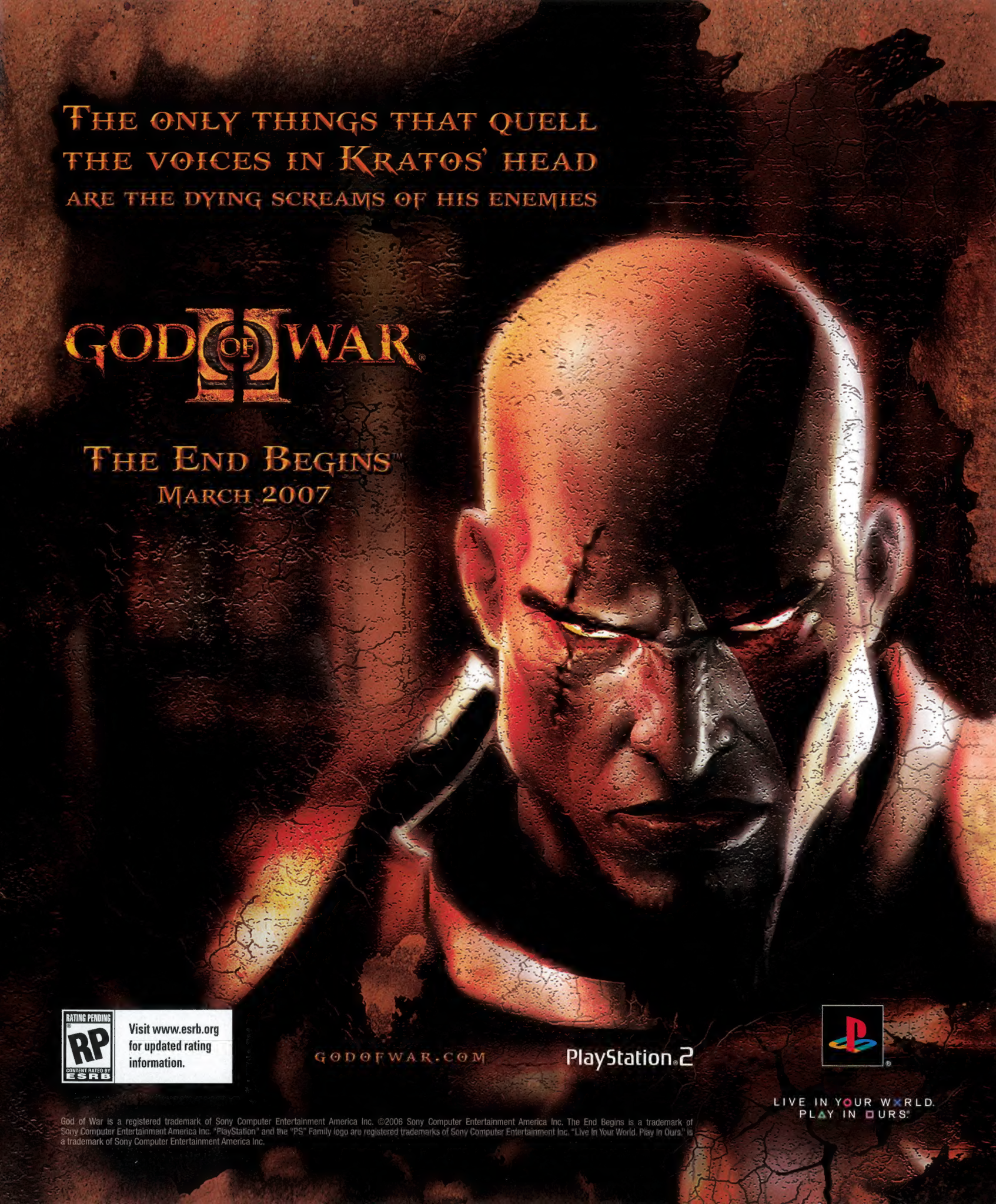
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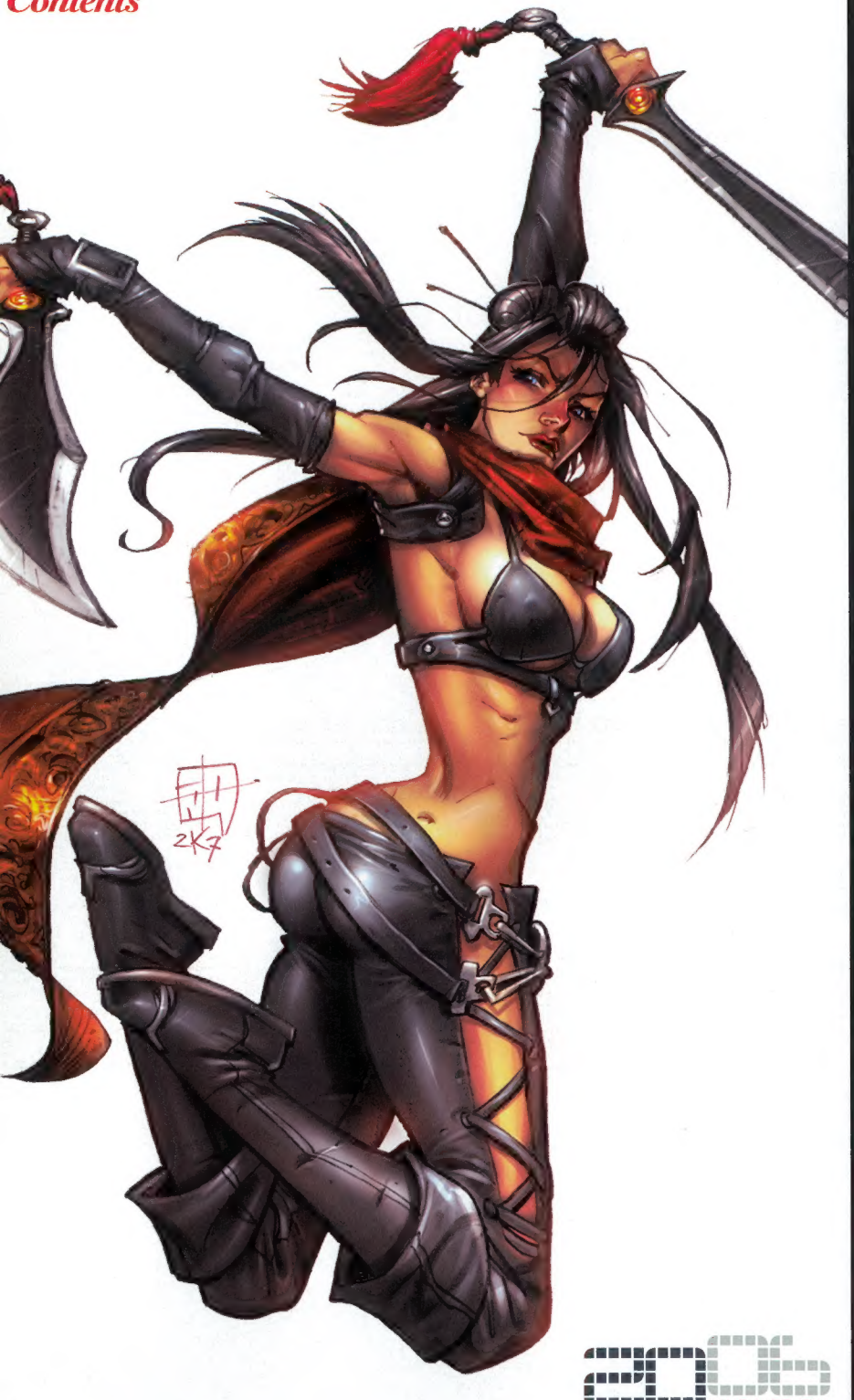

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2006 YEAR IN REVIEW

Our 6th annual Awards are jam packed with the best and brightest, along with loads of other stuff from one of gaming's most memorable years.

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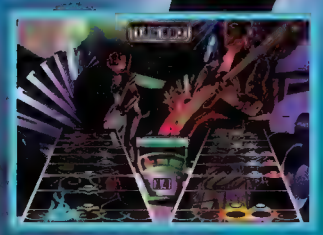

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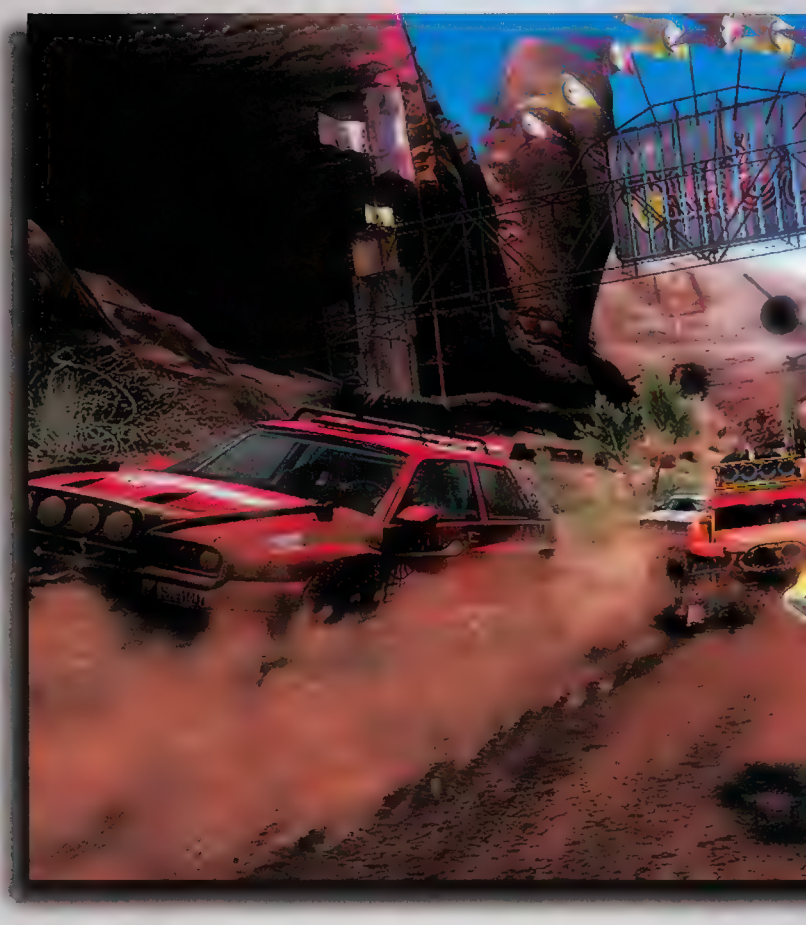

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Language
Violence
PLAYSTATION 3

playback

February 2007

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Sony vs. Nintendo

Now don't get me wrong I like Nintendo just as much as the next guy but I'm sick and tired of my friends' endless tirades about why Nintendo is better than Sony. I figured once and for all I would like to ask gaming experts some questions that have been bothering me.

1. Is the Ps3 really prone to catch on fire?
-No
2. Are Wii's graphics capabilities better than Ps3's?
-Hell no
3. If Sony hadn't put in the wireless motion controllers would most people just consider the Wii's to be a gimmick?
-No
4. Is Sony just a thieving corporation, with no real gaming ideas of it own?
-Big no
My friends are pushing me to the limit. I need answers. Hopefully in my favor so I can rub it in their faces...
Even if it's not I'd still like to know.

Just Wondering,
Mark M.

Decisions, decisions...

So the review of Sony's launch says that it was a disaster. Meanwhile, the Wii has dazzled the public. I've got to say, from almost all the publications I've read, the Wii has come out on top, yet I still would rather have a PS3 and here's why. I used to own all three major consoles, however, within the past month; I sold my Xbox and GameCube because both were just collecting dust. I was planning on using the money to get a Wii for next to nothing out of my pocket, but then I really thought about it. Right now, Wii has Zelda, and within a year
(maybe) it will have Metroid, Smash Bros, and Super Mario Galaxy...and then the list falls dead. Third party support seems about equal to that of the Cube; you've got Dragon Quest and a new Crystal Chronicles game. As for PS3, I can get Resistance now, and look forward four of my favorite series: Metal Gear, Devil May Cry, Ninja Gaiden, and Final Fantasy. Not to mention new games like Assassin's Creed, Heavenly Sword, White Knight, Army of Two, UT 2007...notice that this list is longer and ALL of these games appear to be fantastic options. The type of games on the PS3 are literally impossible to replicate graphically on the Wii and I don't even want to TRY and imagine controlling Ryu Hyabusa with a Wii-mote, the speed and button combinations required are just too high. Sure slashing would be fun, but not only does precision become an issue, but more so fatigue. Now, I'm thinking just about myself and not the general public (unlike what you guys have to do).
I'm sorry that I disagree with your decision about the Wii, but for me personally, the PS3 just feels more right. And yes, I realize that you were comparing the actual launch, and most editors did in fact note that the PS3 was a good long term option.

_Zack B.

Wii-ly happy

I'm a 45 year old gamer and collector that's enjoyed playing since the days of Pong, Atari and Coleco, and I just wanted to say that I think the Wii is the best thing to ever happen to video games.

I was lucky enough to be able to get all three of the next-gen systems at midnight when they were released, and the Wii is by far my favorite. My PS3 is collecting dust already! I look forward to coming home from work and playing my new Nintendo almost everyday. I've never really been into sports games before, but now I can't get enough of them, and I'm looking to buy more. My entire family interacted by playing Wii Sports for more than 3 hours the other night, and they've never really cared for gaming like I have.

Nintendo has created the most innovative gaming machine in history! I can't ever remember a time when I was sore the next day from gaming, and couldn't wait to go back for more as soon as possible. It's a good feeling.

By Nintendo not trying to compete, they've pushed themselves far ahead of the competition.

Mr. Scary TT

"My entire family interacted by playing Wii Sports for more than 3 hours the other night, and they've never really cared for gaming like I have."

Once upon a time...

In your January 2007 issue, Brady Fiechter reviewed Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin and stated that the drawback of the game was such that they should have "stayed away from telling a story in Castlevania." In what way does the presence of a story, much less a good one, detract from the overall experience of this game? A solid story enhances any game. This was a very foolish thing to publish, and it makes you all look like complete idiots to slam a game for the presence of a background story. Add this to your refusal to publish a "Guys of Gaming" volume, and it reflects even more poorly on you.

Emily C.

Seeing Red?

Hello and good day. I am desperately trying to find info on the Red Star. After reading through your December issue it appears someone bought the rights to it and is actually releasing it. However it was mentioned that there would be both a PS2 and an Xbox version. I have my PS2 version reserved at Gamestop.com since the stores themselves are not doing it (the release has been pushed back 2 times already to 6 Feb. 2007) but I cannot find any release information an the Xbox version. I have already tried Best Buy, Target, Circuit City, Comp USA, Game Crazy, Game Stop, Toys R' Us as well as several on-line stores but to no avail (I will not try Wal-Mart at all; they could, and are, going to HELL). Please, tell me this isn't some sort of tease you guys were doing.

The_Toxic_frog

Not X-cited

I think it's so frustrating to get an Xbox 360 & not be able to play my original Xbox games on it. How is it that other companies design their game consoles so that you can play your original games with the new ones & yet the Xbox 360 can't even deliver that. On the Xbox website they have updates, but new ones don't get posted too often & it's sad that when they do it's some crappy game like Catwoman & not Psychonauts, Ultimate Spider-man or Castlevania Curse of Darkness. I'm just saying if your going to deliver give me my moneys worth & make sure you stand out above the rest with what your selling. Thank you for taking your time & reading.

Video Game Freak

Million error

A coworker of mine is in his 50s and he made an off-hand comment the other day about a game he played back in the 80s called Mega-Mania and how it froze on him after playing it all day.I asked him why and he said "I don't know but the score was almost a million and I've got the picture to prove it". I asked him to bring it and let me see it and he did. When the game froze, he still had about 4 lives left with a full energy bar and I thought it was cool.I told him I'd contact a few gaming magazines and see if they would do anything with it since it happened back in the 80s, you know.

Anyway, just giving this a shot.If you decide to run it or need more details on my coworker, then hit me back and get anything you need.

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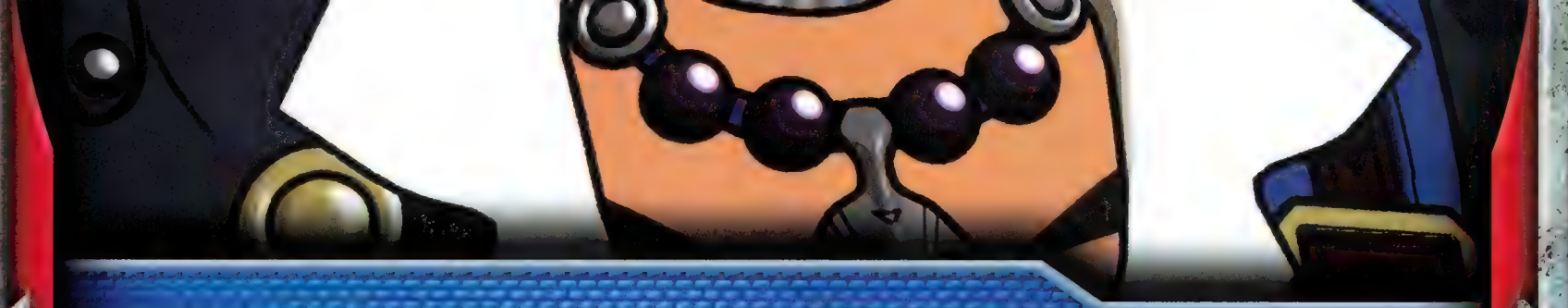

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Who Spiked the Punch?

Judges go haywire for '06 awards show

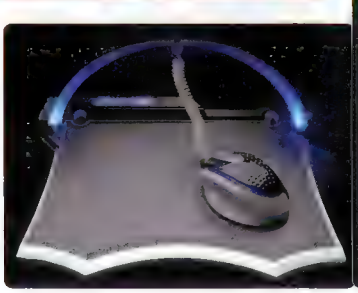
The 4th Annual Spike TV Video Game Awards Show, hosted by everywhere-man Samuel L. Jackson rendered a few surprises, beginning with the selection of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion for game of the year over The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess or Gears of War. Oblivion is a fine game but… Oblivion also snagged top RPG honors over Final Fantasy XII (even though it's an action-RPG). And Jack Sparrow, character of the year? Paging Marcus Fenix! They did get a few right, however, including studio of the year (Epic Games), Best Soundtrack (Guitar Hero II), Best Handheld game (New SMB) and Best Breakthrough Technology (Nintendo Wii). Otherwise paint was smoked all around. Still, it was a cool show featuring performances by Tenacious D and AFI and the exclusive world premiere of Blizzard's opening cinematic for World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade. We snapped some photos outside but once again couldn't get our photographer inside to make sure everyone had underpants on.

"They did get a few right, however, including studio of the year (Epic Games)..."

Seeing Red

Will The Red Star ever shine?

Since reviewing and reviewing both the Xbox and PS2 versions of The Red Star, the Acclaim action shooter that got stuck in release purgatory when the company went belly up, the game has believe it or not once again been given the red light. Sources closest to the debacle say that the latest snag has to do with Mud Ducks plan to release the game as a value title. Since it was approved as a full retail unit originally, there is an apparent snafu as approval for "value" titles is different. In other words, you can't have The Red Star because the new distributor decided to give you a great deal and well, somebody somewhere down the line doesn't like that idea. I say we find that guy and the nearest dumpster with a lock on it. Stay tuned for more details as this unfortunate saga continues.



Six Axis for PS2

Return of the boomerang

With Psyclone Essentials' new TiltSense controller you can transform your PS2 racing, flying, skateboarding and snowboarding games into tilt-tastic fun. Looking like a scaled down version of the original PS3 pad design, the TS, which also works as a standard controller, boasts an 8' cable, rubberized finish, and a super comfortable feel due to its wide shoulders and high quality overall design and functionality.

Heads up!

The ultimate mouse

The Fanatec Headshot Controller is a combination of Fanatec's Headshot mouse, their plasmaglyd technology aura mouse pad, emulator software, an illuminated cable holder, and USB 2.0 hub all packed into a LAN suitcase (pocket protector not included). Perfect for discerning enthusiasts or casual gamers, it features programmable macros on the mouse and allows players to program any keyboard. The mouse can also function as a joystick, so flying in games like *Battlefield* is no longer an issue. The mouse's size is even adjustable, so it works with any size hand. And when you're not gaming, the feel is akin to ice skating; no lie... and it lights up! www.fanatec.com.

IF THERE'S ONE THING YOU LEARN WHEN YOU ARE A KID...
IT'S TO NEVER GO INTO THE FOREST...

ANIME

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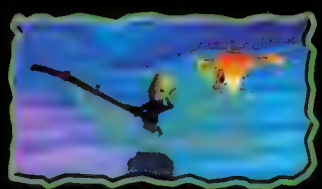

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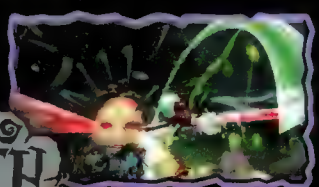

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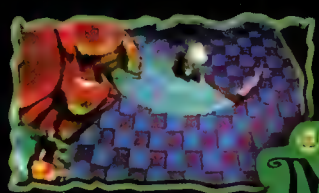

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System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Codemasters
Developer	Triumph Studios	Available	July

OVERLORD

The evil minions do

In the twisted fantasy world of Overlord, you can either be evil, or really evil. You see, these are very dark times, the darkest of times, really, and you're a very dark dude known as the Overlord, who possesses a reputation of pure nastiness. There's always time to head back to the Dark Tower to be with the Mistress sisters Rose and Velvet, but mostly you're spending your time leading an army of minions to their death as they do anything in their power to obey your wishes: ruling the land and disposing of the Seven Fallen Heroes. Sacrificing, wielding, pillaging and lots of death ensue.

Being bad is always fun, but Overlord isn't some sicko role-playing journey where you're led to delight in the disdainful side of violence. "In this game you get to be the Dark Lord governing a world, but people don't need to worry that the game instigates hate and leads to kids to turn into real-world dictators," says Lennart Sas, director and designer of Overlord. "The game is too tongue in cheek for that. We're nice developers. Trust us."

Everything in the game carries a humorous tone, and if for some reason you're feeling a bit generous, forging ahead without, say, sucking dry the souls of the innocent or destroying a peaceful village with impunity, you can complete Overlord with a reward of 100 percent uncorrupted. Your deeds are gradually documented, dictated during returns to your tower by a jester minion who might proclaim you "the exterminator of the Elven race" or "ravager of villages."

The consequences and motivations behind your actions are being explored in the greyer areas of existence. "We're all fantasy fans, but most games and stories of this type appear to be made according to the Secret Tome of Fantasy Rules," says Sas. "Our goal was to do things differently in as many areas as possible,

Brady Fiechter

and telling the story of how a man gets to be Dark Lord was a great starting point for this. The game is about becoming the evil Overlord, so there are fewer traditional good/evil choices while we explore the Power Corrupts and Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely a bit more."

When you think Hero, you think keeper of all things righteous. But the Seven Heroes you're out to destroy aren't the nicest of the bunch. "Central to the set-up of the story is that the mighty, and once good, Seven Heroes have become corrupted through their success," says Overlord producer Paul Hulsebosch. "As the Overlord, you'll walk a similar path. Since you can learn how to control dozens of rampaging and destructive minions, steal stuff to get a great set of armor and weapons, it's tempting to go for the bad-ass solution: just kill everything that stands in your way, ignoring any pleas of the weak."

The Heroes all took part of the power of the old Overlord, so they're formidable opponents, all surrounded by a large group of followers. One of your first missions is to confront the gluttonous former Halfling hero named Melvin Underbelly, who has taken over a farmer's village to provide him with food. To even reach him you'll have to fight through an industrial size kitchen. In the boss battle, the fat Halfling will attempt to eat your minions alive and squash them under his massive weight. With the Halfling king dead, you have conquered your first village and given the peasants something more evil to fear.

"To conquer the world in a more benign way is a bit trickier as your minions aren't schooled in subtle or gently-does-it," says Hulsebosch. "So generally the straightforward way results in evil acts, while to do the right thing makes the game harder. Each choice, however, will

The ruler of the land and his evil doers...

"Any new minion you add to your army is untrained and unequipped."

provide its own rewards. It affects your appearance, the spells you wield, how the population reacts to you and the look of your Dark Tower."

The minions in Overlord serve as its central gameplay element. These impish creatures believe you to be the reincarnation of the Overlord, following you with a blind faith into any situation you demand. You continually strive to gather up an array of these small beings—up to dozens at a time—upgrade them in numerous ways, and send them out to conquer. "Any new minion you add to your army is untrained and unequipped. So it's important to find a way to win your battles by losing as few minions as you can," says Hulsebosch. "Meanwhile you should try to find—and conquer—all sorts of stuff that was stolen from your Dark Tower, as those missing parts help you gain personal power. Losing a minion or two is no big deal, but using tactics and skill to prevent that makes the life of any Overlord much easier."

With the tap of a button as you point to an area of coverage, individual minions can be sent out, and holding for a longer time commands a spread of them. You can control them directly if you want, or let the AI do more of the work as they move out to perform a number of tasks. "We like to think we found an intuitive way to control both the Overlord and the minions at the same time," says Sas.

The minions go places the giant Overlord cannot, lay traps, perform suicide missions, ambush and steal lifeforce, among other things. The only way to gain back health and mana is through sacrificing minions. And instead of collecting objects directly, the minions gather all the loot and special items scattered about, carrying the goods back to the tower.

"The Dark Tower is your base, your home. Here you start your adventures and return from them," says Hulsebosch. "Your power, how many minions you can control, what spells you have are all reflected in the appearance of the tower. It's also the place where you forge your equipment, view and fight prisoners in your dungeon, and visit the private quarters to spend some quality time with your Mistress. The tower grows from a ruin to a full-on dark tower reflecting your choice of how evil you've been in your conquests."

Spend quality time with your Mistress?

"Power has sex-appeal. So, as the power of your Overlord grows, some

women might like to spend their time with you," says Hulsebosch. "That's why you have private quarters in your Dark Tower. And while you are busy earning (looting) money, your mistress is spending it—mostly on restoring and decorating your Dark Tower."

When forging weapons and enchanting them with the souls of the minions at the tower, the Overlord has a number of options in front of him. "For example, lobbing a bunch of fiery Red minions into the forge can result into a flaming weapon," says Hulsebosch. "It might take hundreds of them to get the desired effect though, and since you get minions by killing other living beings, you have to kill a lot to enchant your weapons. Of course, there might also be secret recipes for combinations of minions to discover."

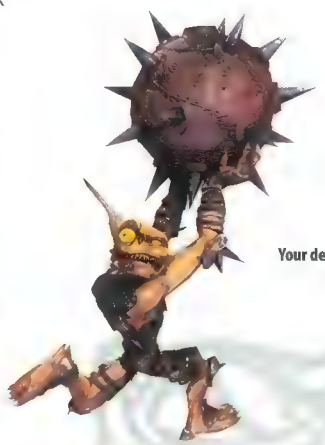
When the game opens, the tower is basically a crumbling eye soar. The previous owner gained his strength through several artifacts, which are lost in various places within the world. By locating these ancient objects, additional power and form is restored to the tower, which is also reflected in your personal growth.

While you're striving to be a mighty ruler of every living thing, you begin your adventure fairly peasant-like. The Overlord grows along with the aid of his minions the more successful your journey. His central "powers are grouped into four types and can swing the tides of battle in your favor when used at the correct time," says Sas. "The Overlord's offensive powers are fire-based and can set entire areas on fire; for example, wait till enemies walk through a dry wheat field. The shield grows from a small shield orb to a powerful reactive force that has the ability to disintegrate enemies foolish enough to come near you. The minion powers buff the minion's strength and can send them into a frenzy where they destroy everything they can in reach. Then there's the enemy mind altering spells which work great in combination with the minions."

The land and the inhabitants you'll be gleefully burning, devouring and destroying won't be so unfamiliar to fans of fantasy, but the game certainly has its distinct tones. "For Overlord we went for a semi-realistic style as the graphics need to represent the fun and charm of the gameplay," says Sas. "But we've always made sure to give it the next-gen touch. Another important aspect of the game is contrast. Instead of grim Mordor-like lands, its a lot more fun to raid and pillage cute looking Halfling lands. The game itself will take you through five different areas, from Dwarven mountains and mines, to Elven forests and caves, and the city-state of the Paladin – each with their unique inhabitants and challenges."

And while the game plays out its fantasy theme with traditional flavors in mind, the parody element reigns. "To a lot of people parody means a silly spoof," says Sas. "We try to avoid this label because although our game has a dark sense of humor it creates a substantial world with its own story and characters. A lot of the humor comes from the absurdity of the characters and situations and twisting of fantasy stereotypes."

The design team says they're a nice bunch of guys, but you'd think making a game like Overlord might require a little restraint now and again? "In a setting like this we often have great difficulty constraining ourselves and people try to out do each other with twisted ideas," says Hulsebosch. "The different domains you enter all have one of those Seven Heroes as your main opponent and those Seven Heroes are loosely based on the seven classical deadly sins. One of those sins is lust, so we have this city with a bar with many rooms and visitors of many different kinds, gender and species... So, our design meetings have often been great fun—but not always printable!"



Your dear Minion friends...

LENNART SAS describes the 4 Minion types:

"We always tend to look for things outside of regular fantasy for inspiration first. For the game we needed smaller creatures than Orcs, but instead of using goblins as a reference, the charming and diverse creatures found in movies like *Gremlins*, *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* offered a lot more inspiration; their destructiveness, cuteness, the way they interact with their environment, were all great reference.

Brown Fighters

Browns are the first minion type to give themselves to the Overlord and are the strongest in general combat. They have the unique ability to pick up equipment from defeated foes and use it – pitchforks, severed bloodied unicorn horns and the like. They don't care much for their appearance and have been seen carrying objects ranging from pumpkins to chef hats.

Red Fire Imps

The fireproof red minions are like archers using blazing fireballs as their arrows. Packs of Reds can set enemies on fire from a distance, but are weak hand-to-hand.

Green Assassins

Greens are the assassins and love their stealth attacks. They'll try to get behind an enemy, jump on its back and then stab it viciously to death – great for ambushes. They're also immune to poisoning.

Blue Healers

The enigmatic Blues are the smartest of the minions and the only ones who can swim; they can also resurrect fallen minions and get them ready to fight again."

OVERLORD: *The Process*

LENNART SAS, DIRECTOR AND DESIGNER

"I am responsible for producing the overall design of the game and during development provide direction and give support the development staff. Next to planning, chatting with the publisher, a lot of my day is spent making the rounds on the development floor, seeing what people need in order to perform their jobs."

PAUL HULSEBOSCH, PRODUCER

"I'm just responsible for producing the game - planning it all - which is like making a very big puzzle. My job is to have everybody work on the right things at the right time. There are loads of dependencies during such a project. If a level designer needs to make a certain level, let's say a scene on a farm, he needs all sorts of stuff from others on the team. The character designer needs to be finished with designing a peasant and some animals. Those need to be animated so they can move, which is done by someone else. And we need a farm of course, which is usually made by a third person. And finally we need some sounds to make it lively and a programmer to make it all behave like we want to. All this needs to be ready before the level designer can do the job. And while he is making the farm-level, the guys who made the model, the animation, the behavior and the sound need to be working on new stuff. Planning this whole machinery fills my day!"

TRIUMPH STUDIOS

The man in charge...

Triumph's Mistresses

"Rose does not like to take anyone's side (apart from her own), but her skills make her much in demand throughout the land, so she's never short of work, despite the fact she's a bit bossy and domineering. Rose won't kill but she'll certainly tell you the best way to do it... and clear up the bodies afterwards. She simply acknowledges killing as a necessity (acknowledging it's just a necessity for other people). She can be described as lawfully evil.
Rose offers a great selection of upgrades for the tower.

Velvet is very attractive and much more sexual and alluring than her sister. She's an expert in manipulating men and will act flirtatiously towards the player, using her feminine wiles to get what she wants.
Think of Velvet as a particularly evil footballer's wife, constantly attracted to the monetary, aesthetic and amoral trappings of evil. Velvet essentially enjoys the acts of evil, but has no concept of how to actually get things done, or what to do afterwards. She also gets easily bored if she doesn't get her own way, or if her evil admirer runs out of money. Velvet offers a more exclusive selection of expensive upgrades for the tower."

EDWIN RHEMREV, ARTIST

"My daily tasks consist mostly of doing concept art, and environment modeling and texturing.

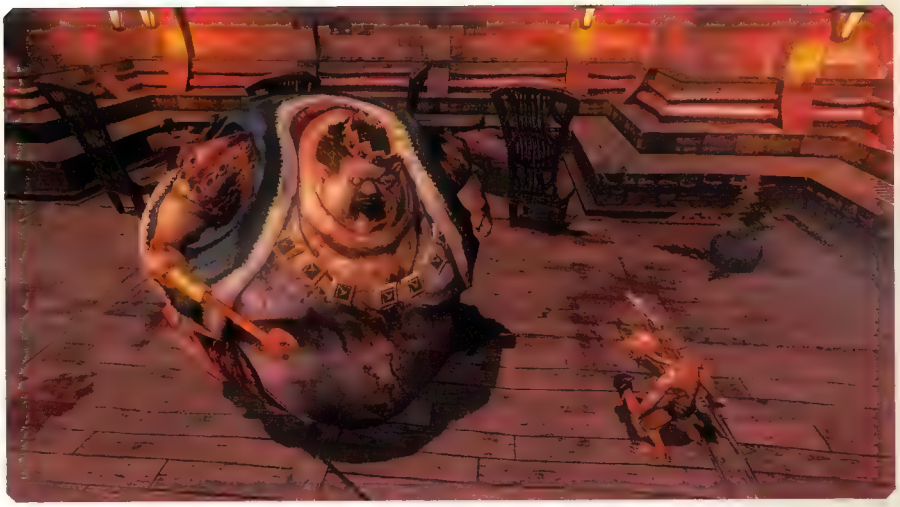
From a level design document (written up by the level designers), I receive a written description of what a level will consist of, what the gameplay will be, and what assets are needed.

When starting a new level, I usually open up a drawing package called Painter, and start doing some quick digital sketches on what the color schemes and general feel of the level should be. Once I have a good idea of what the general atmosphere will be, I then start breaking things down, and start concepting things like wallsets, vegetation, and of course lots of props to fill the levels with.

Everything you see in the game has first been sketched out and designed to make sure everything fits within each level. For instance, the dwarves have very rough buildings, furniture and equipment, while everything in the Elven levels is very gracious and delicate.

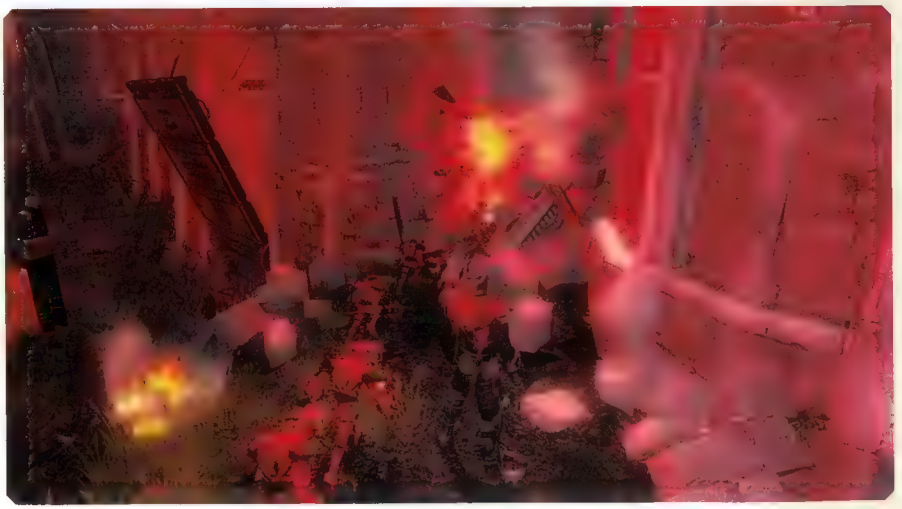
After the concept phase, the modeling / texturing phase begins. First I start out with doing terrain textures for the new level, and come up with a color/lighting set, which creates the first mood and look of the level. After this, we can start filling the level with buildings, vegetation, props, and everything else required to make it look great."

"Everything you see in the game has first been sketched out and designed to make sure everything fits within each level."



MERIJN VOGELSANG, LEVEL DESIGNER

"I joined Triumph Studios just after I finished my study in game design. What I really liked about Overlord was the fact that it combines different genres: action, adventure and strategy are all important aspects of its gameplay. This is also very challenging to design for, since there are very few examples of other games that use this mix. My task is to create the different parts of the game world which can be conquered by the player. I can create environments by literally sculpting hills and valleys, painting roads or grasslands, place trees, houses or bridges and inhabit the areas with all kinds of creatures. It's like playing God while he was creating the earth."



YASUMIKO, ANIMATOR

"From the animation point of view, the team injects life to the game. It is almost the soul since gamers perceive the game world from what they can see on the screen—how characters act and their reactions.

The main challenge of course is to make the world and those characters believable especially in a RPG where gamers create relationship with the characters. The world needs to be consistent and characters should have their own individual trait within the world. Animation plays an important part to show the differences and in making them believable.

Daily tasks can start from day-dreaming of how you would behave and act if you were a certain character in that world. That inspiration only comes if one thinks hard enough for as many possibilities as he/she can. Planning this is important, as is actually sitting down and animating! Final integration within the game engine determines how good the work will look in the game.

Love everything cos' nobody would hate fun things. **play**

"From the animation point of view, the team injects life to the game."

The creative minds behind Overlord.

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Southpeak Interactive
Developer	Artificial Studios	Available	April 3rd (Xbox & PC), October (PlayStation 3)

Monster Madness
Battle for Surburbia

Hang 'em high or go berserk in the day and night

words **Dave Halverson**

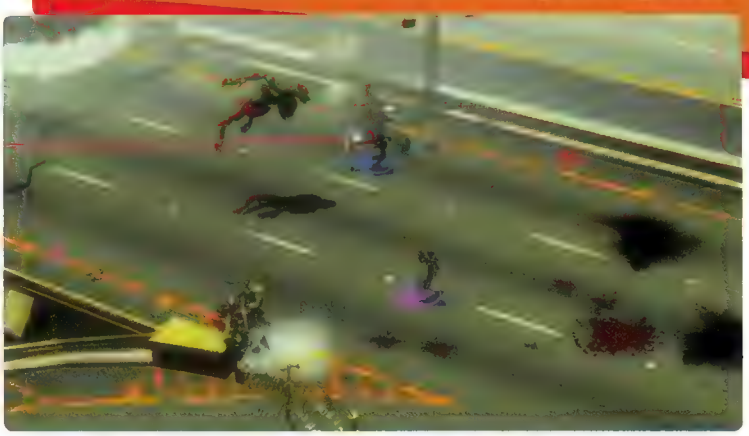
I've been following Artificial Studios' Monster Madness for 2-plus years and here it sits on the brink of being the next-gen Zombies Ate my Neighbors or a huge disappointment. MM seemingly has it all; 1-to-4-player single-screen gameplay, vehicles galore, evolving weaponry, ranged and melee combat and Unreal Engine 3 powered graphics.

The slick real time graphic novel that accompanies the story (voiced exceedingly well I might add) sets the tone on campy fun, and once on the incredibly gorgeous field of play you'll find each character a dexterous participant…once you wrangle the preset controls. This one is weird and you're locked in. Rotating is on the right analog and direction on the left (standard and effective) but jumping and dodging (two important elements) aren't so lucky; relegated to clicking the sticks. Shooting is on the RT shoulder and specials on RB--roger that; no problem—but the left shoulders are used to point up and down in favor of the AI adjusting for height. This would be great if it was more effective but at present it's a little tricky targeting jumping tarantulas and the like. Holding down both left shoulder triggers allows you to manipulate the game's camera (although only on the horizontal plane) a feature which needs to be relegated to a single button. Otherwise the camera attempts to slowly float behind the character creating an annoying effect where the player should be able to easily and smoothly alter their point of view. At least one optional camera angle would be nice too. At present the camera floats a bit high for my taste. I'd like the option to bring it down and allow for a slightly wider point of view. All of these quirks can be easily addressed by the time the game ships, although even if they're not I did come to grips with the game's control scheme within a few levels.

Where MM really needs help is in the balancing. At present playing single-player you'll find yourself respawning at the last checkpoint far too often. Certain enemies that shoot you from off screen can end your only life way too easily (there's no way to block) and Artificial love to throw huge assailants at you right after you've used all of your available arms to deal with the first… It's just not fair. This means that every time you beat major enemies you need to run back to Larry's truck (the resident arms dealer) and pray you have enough monster tokens and parts to reequip yourself. Still, a couple of impossible to dodge hits from these amazingly modeled freaks will send you back to repeat the entire process. I rock at shooters and this preview drove me crazy. Even on easy it's nearly impossible.

Otherwise as you can see MM is an action-shooter's dream come true, which is why I implore that Artificial addresses each and every issue. If they do you're looking at the next big thing in shooters. If they don't…I hope Pelican makes a NERF 360 controller soon. **play**

"…once on the incredibly gorgeous field of play you'll find each character a dexterous participant."



Look! Sub par screens of multi-player mode from the publisher! I pledge to capture good screens for the review.

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Sega	Available	March

Virtua Tennis 3

Greg Orlando

There seems no reason not to heap praise, lots and lots of it, on Virtua Tennis 3 for the PlayStation 3. The game comes with a fine heritage. Its roster of playable, real-world tennis professionals is substantial. The courts and characters are beautiful, the gameplay is suitably wonderful. It may be more of the same in terms of what it presents to its audience, but it's good to know that more of the same is an excellent proposition indeed.

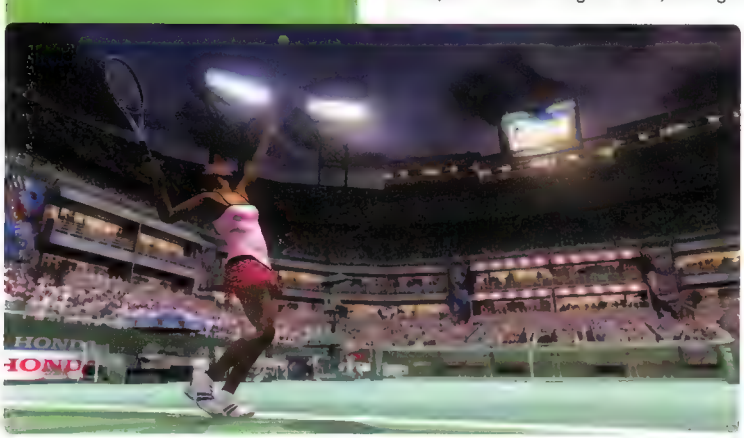
Roger Federer, Maria Sharapova, Andy Roddick, Rafael Nadal, and Venus Williams are among the 20 licensed players in the game. Each, of course, is better suited to different tasks: The Brit Tim Henman is known for his speed, Federer is more of an all-around player. Players will also be able to create their own racketeer with a create-a-player mode Sega representatives are likening to those found in Tiger Woods PGA Tour games as far as its depth and sheer amount of options afforded to players. Here, players can not only choose their characters' strengths and their play style in terms of how they hit forehand- and backhand shots, but also modify their faces by stretching faces, chins, noses, foreheads as if they were putty.

Sixaxis control allows for movement of the various players simply by tilting the PlayStation 3's controller. The great caveat here is that while doing so is genuinely fun, precision seems to be compromised; it was far too easy to over- or underrun a hit ball, or simply be too far forward or back to properly return a shot. D-pad and gameplay button control for movement and ball-hitting may prove to be a more acceptable proposition for those seeking precise control over the on-screen athletes.

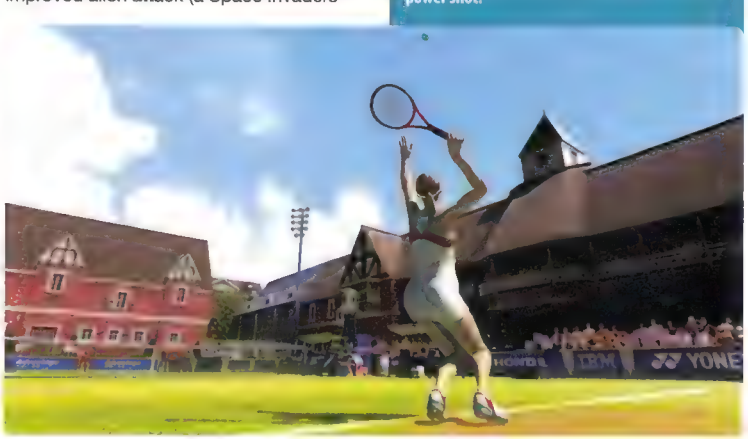
A dedicated world tour mode, where it's necessary to take a neophyte player (either a created character or one from the game's pre-established roster), serves as the game's great draw for solo play. Sega has promised that this time around, a player can suffer injuries on the tour, and might be forced to miss matches.

The game further soars with the addition of 10 new minigames. These can be played solo or competitively with a friend, and new offerings include, among others, video bingo where players are challenged to whack balls at a moving series of numbers in order to complete a diagonal, horizontal, or vertical row on a bingo board and video curling, which requires balls to be hit in order to send curling pucks into special score zones. Returning minigame favorites include an improved alien attack (a Space Invaders send-up) and fruit dash, a goofy offering where players must collect apples, pears, and pineapples while avoiding huge tennis balls. **play**

The game further soars with the addition of 10 new minigames.



Maria Sharapova (actually looking like Maria Sharapova) going for the power shot.



Armored Core 4

Metallic to the Core

System(s): PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sega
Developer: From Software
Available: March

"It's almost like the Gran Turismo of mech games," Sega's Mike Schmitt says about the third-person Armored Core 4.

Do not misconstrue: Schmitt is not making a comparison about the two games' quality. He seems content to let 4 speak for itself on that matter. Instead, he's lauding the game's impressive customization options, the very same ones that let a player create a garish pink-camouflage mechanized behemoth.

From Software, fresh from the Xbox 360's mech-heavy action game Chrome Hounds, is ready for something new. This, too, should not be misconstrued. From is not veering away from mechanized combat with 4, not by any stretch of the imagination. Instead, it's taking a new approach to the mechs themselves. "What scared people away from mech games is how slow and lethargic [the vehicles] were," Schmitt says. This time around, the mechs are fast.

The game's plot remains somewhat murky, but the corporations have taken over. A resistance movement has sprung up, and players are caught fighting a new kind of war: one that emphasizes the evolution of the mech itself, with a series of faster, more nimble machines stepping in to replace the previous, lumbering models. To further this end, each vehicle will have access to three separate kinds of boosts which can be accessed by pressing either the PlayStation controllers top left- or right triggers, or its triangle button.

One boost offers a momentary burst of speed for when a mech needs to quickly dodge in order to avoid an enemy strike. This combat boost is separate from the regular boost which allows players to move quickly amid the battlefield, provided the mech has sufficient energy to sustain such. The third type of rapid movement has been dubbed overboost, and is described by Schmitt as a sort-of race mode function, akin to hitting the nitrous on a car. **Greg Orlando**

F.E.A.R.

Creepy first-person shooting

Publisher: PlayStation 3
Sierra
Developer: Monolith Productions/Day 1 Studios
Available: March

If you've followed the routinely positive coverage of F.E.A.R from its PC origins to Xbox 360 and haven't played it yet, what's you're problem? Too scared? Maybe you're just waiting for the PS3 version, which is finally almost here. The wait will be worth it.

This latest version of the creepy first-person shooter is F.E.A.R. to the core, but more than just a simple port, the game contains a few new twists and exclusive content. Playing with the PS3 pad may not be quite as satisfying as the 360's, but that's all pure preference.

Beyond the subjective and subtler differences between the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions of F.E.A.R. that are always to be expected in a port, what all versions share, and what really defines the game to me, is the incredible AI; Monolith knows how to give their enemies a real presence, and in a game where tension is a high point, the shootouts can be incredibly

gripping. Creeping through the shadows, hearing noises you don't want to hear, getting accosted by super soldier ands darting into slow motion combat—F.E.A.R. is an experience that feeds off the adrenaline. **Brady Fiechter**

F1 Championship Edition

A welcome return to the curcuit

PS3
SCEA

Liverpool Studios
March

The word "hardcore" is thrown around a lot in game descriptors, and with a game like Formula One Championship Edition, hardcore is exactly what it is. For someone new to this type of racer, there are plenty of options to toy with to lessen the demands for precision, but for the, well, hardcore, the dedicated simulation side of the experience can be taken about as far as you're wanting to go. It's rare for an F1 game to even make it to the states, and this looks like a good one.

As you'd expect, an obligatory season mode takes center stage. The 2006 FIA season is fully represented, showcasing everything official: 18 tracks, 11 teams, 22 drivers and all the rules and everything else in between. If you take it online, you can race against 11 human drivers, with the rest filled in by the AI.

An in-depth career mode is also being implemented, which will take longer to jump into but offers nice rewards if you like the idea of proving yourself and competing for more than simply making it across the finish line. You basically start out as a rookie in need of a team, setting off to prove yourself and climb the ranks by tackling a number of race factors. **Brady Fiechter**

Crackdown

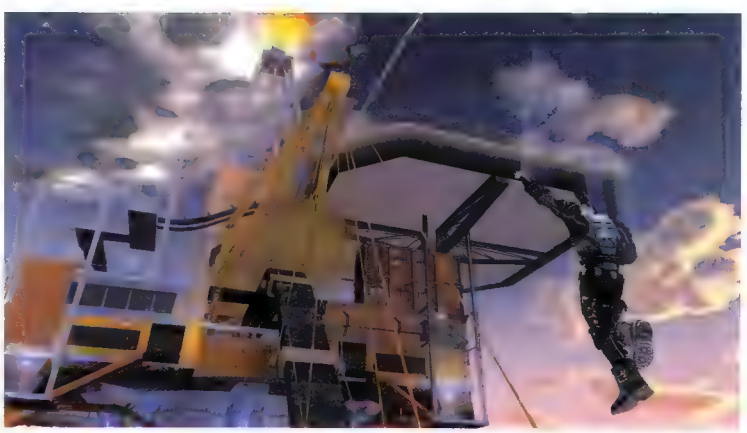
Be the WMD

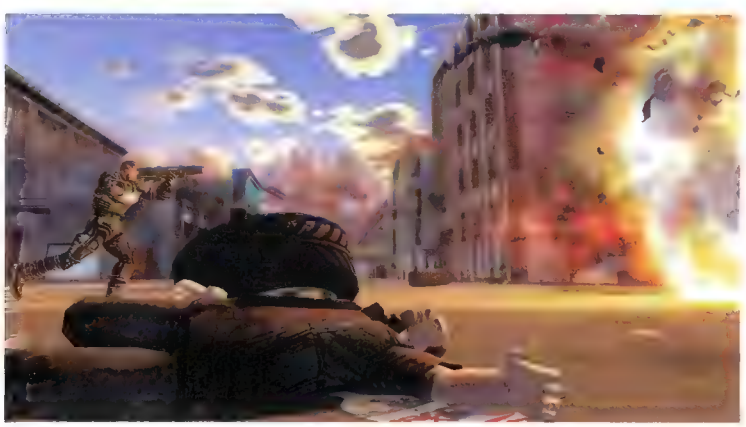
Xbox 360
Microsoft

Real Time Worlds
February

This just in. Crackdown (cover story #59), the premiere Xbox 360 title from Real Time Worlds is in the can and headed your way late February as scheduled. We won't have the review until next issue so in the meantime here's the latest batch of screens to hold you over.

Crackdown is a new breed of open-world "sandbox" game where the playfield is divided between traditional ground-based assaults and all new vertical ascents (and descents) as you attempt to crack down on crime, protecting the last bastion of law and order in a world gone stark raving mad; all the while evolving your character in every conceivable manner, transitioning from super strong to Hulk-like status as the opposition builds. Apparently some major character customization has taken place giving players the ability to transform the hero into a mad dog in league with the kingpins he's been deployed to seek out and put down for a dirt nap. Sandbox's have certainly come a long way. **D Halverson**





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Dawn of Mana

A whole new world

System(s)	PS2
Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Square Enix
Available	Q1 2007

Square Enix loves big shoes. Just look at those feet! It seems like Kingdom Hearts wasn't enough; the Japanese developers needed to get the attention of podiatrists everywhere. Perhaps this is the future of gaming -- big feet means big business.

Or maybe the heroes of Mana need those feet to anchor them to the earth in a fully-realized physics engine. S-E is using the Havok software from Half-Life 2 to deliver a world that doesn't just look good, it plays good. Each level will be littered with stumps, boulders, fences, and creatures for Eldy (latest hero in the Mana world) to manipulate. Using a "Tree Sword," Eldy can whip up pieces of the world for use against foes. Or he can use foes against foes as he tosses Rabites at Rabites.

Rumor has it that the leveling-up process in Mana will be unique, as each level has the character restarting with no experience points, forcing Eldy to really work with the world to achieve success against his enemies. But what is Eldy battling? He's teaming up with token female Ritzia and a Rabite named Puck to save his home from an invading army.

This game is part of the upcoming series of titles in the "World of Mana." Much like the anticipated Final Fantasy XIII games, all of the Mana games are interrelated. The DS RPG, Children of Mana, takes place in the same world, and gives a glimpse of what to expect from Square's rebooting of the Mana franchise. Look for more big feet in the future! **Heather Campbell**

Alien Syndrome

It's time for rebirth

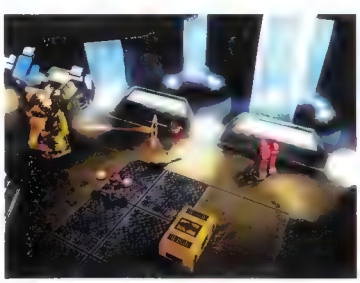
System(s)	Wii, PSP
Published	Sega
Developer	Totally Games
Available	Summer

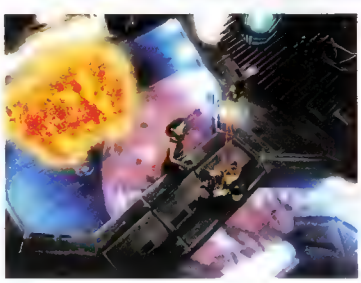
The classic arcade game Alien Syndrome will see its rebirth this summer, as Sega and Totally Games plan to take the classic two-dimensional shooter and turn it into an action-heavy role-playing game.

Totally Games has promised to move Syndrome into three dimensions for a game that pays homage to the original while still carving out its own identity. The protagonist Aileen Harding and her droid assistant are all-new, as are many of the game's weapons and armors (approximately 80 in all) and environments. Remixed versions of the original game's music, and a storyline similar to that seen in the arcade Syndrome, serve as subtle nods to the source material.

The Wii version for Syndrome promises to hold customization options aplenty for its heroine Harding, with her assistant droid capable of creating new items and weapons. There is no word of such options for its PSP brother, and Totally has yet to indicate if there will be other variations between the two versions.

In addition to single-player action, Syndrome features multiplayer action wherein up to four people can battle aliens and huge bosses in a futuristic setting. For the Wii, the game will feature controls tailored to the Wii's motion sensing remote, but neither Sega nor Totally Games has been forthcoming with details as to how these function in gameplay. The PSP Syndrome will allow for Wi-Fi play. **Greg Orlando**





"...a game that pays homage to the original while still carving out its own identity."

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play

Staff Round-up

Reviews

February 2007

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Star Wars Lethal Alliance 044
Platypus 044

Dave Halverson

Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, and open-world
Now playing: Bullet Witch, Motor Storm, Kameo Elements of Power, Voodoo Vince
PS3 update...worth it? Dave...Dave!
He's playing Motor Storm in his Heavenly Sword shrine...

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Executive Editor

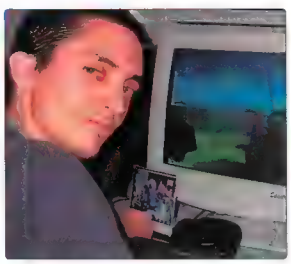
Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Viva Pinata, Gears of War
PS3 update... Worth it? (Still wanting to go Medieval) ...grumble...yeah.

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Rogue Galaxy p. 034

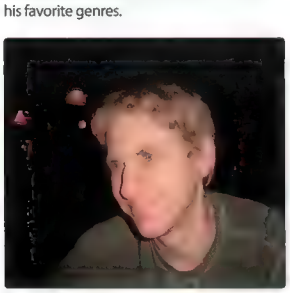
The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres

Japan Editor

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Casey Loe

Contributing Editor

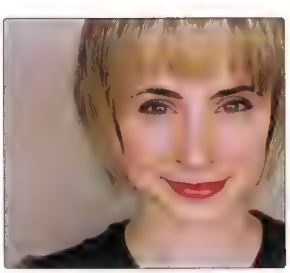
Favorite genres: RPGs, action, humming-bird simulators
Now playing: Portrait of Ruin, Gears of War
PS3 update...Worth it? Nope

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Contributing Editor

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Heather Campbell

Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting,
PS3 update... I can't wait to play Mario Galaxy.

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs

Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Zelda. Wii Sports
PS3 update...worth it? Yes!

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

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System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	SCEA	Available	January 30, 2007
Developer	Level 5	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen 13+

Rogue Galaxy

Lost in space

Heather Campbell

When reviewing Rogue Galaxy, I came up against a very specific dilemma. After hours and hours of playing through the latest Japanese RPG by Dragon Quest development gurus Level 5, it was easy to be swept away by the production values of the game. It's clearly well-made, with an expansive, diverse world, extraordinary graphics, typically beautiful character design, a sweet battle system, charming music, and an unbelievable localization. Even at a close distance, the game seems destined for high marks.

But somewhere around the mid-point of the title, I found myself under the cloud of an unusual boredom. This game, with canyons of depth and play options – this game, which allows you to (gasp!) control battles during fights with monsters in the over world – this game which goes so far out of its way to impress you … was just not enticing anymore. I put the controller down, I paced; I went out for coffee and considered what it was about Rogue that was upsetting me so.

When I sat down again with my PS2, dropped in the disc and began again, I realized what was off-kilter about the RPG. Rogue Galaxy is slow. Not in a plot way – but by way of execution. There are plenty of reasons to Ferrari from set-piece to set-piece, but the game doesn't let you get from point A to point B without significant lethargy. Every piece of dialogue is an island, every sentence (well-acted though it may be) is met with a few seconds of silence before another character responds. Every door-way takes a little too long to open, every menu drags like cloth under water. This isn't loading time, at least not directly. There's no icon that pops up in the corner and announces, "Accessing." Instead, it's like Level 5 thinned out the loading times, and spread them over the entire game. This is especially clear when you compare it to a game like Final Fantasy XII, which gallops along so quickly that even 100 hours of

"The unmistakable refinement of Rogue Galaxy makes it a worthy addition to any RPG library"

gameplay feel breakneck.

Once I came to terms with this pace, however, the game's other strengths were less obfuscated. The unmistakable refinement of Rogue Galaxy makes it a worthy addition to any RPG library. The story is recognizable jRPG faire, sure. And the supporting characters and side quests are nothing new or groundbreaking. But sometimes a game doesn't have to smash expectations to be good. A game can be solid, like RPG furniture. You rely on it to provide you with a good time, but it doesn't blow your mind or reorient your outlook on life. And if you can enjoy an unhurried voyage through the galaxy, or are a fan of Level 5's other extraordinary projects (Dragon Quest VIII, Dark Cloud), then Rogue has plenty to offer. Just don't expect the quick-paced combat of, say, Kingdom Hearts II, or the open-ended grandeur of Oblivion. This is a fast-paced Journey of the Cursed King; it's an action-RPG for those with few hard-core combo skills.

The story of Rogue Galaxy is the story of Jaster Rogue, a bounty hunter on the desert planet Rosa. Rosa has been commandeered by the Longadia Commonwealth, so he harbors little remaining love for his former home. After a few chance moments of mistaken identity, he is whisked away by Space Pirates to find the intergalactic source of eternal life. He'll need to stop Walkog Drazer, president of the Dytron Corporation, before this would-be ruler of space itself ends up with the coveted fountain of youth, and enslaves the galaxy.

Rogue Galaxy features a mash-up of many familiar RPG elements in its gameplay, all streamlined to speed up the pace of the Japanese original. Weapons synthesis plays a big part in the game (a tradition of Level-5) as does item synthesis. New moves for combat are unlocked via a would-be Sphere Grid called the Revelation Flow. Combat is real-time, with character switching possible mid action. There's a Pokemon-style mini-game, Insectron, which gives players a chance to rest from the main quest, or play PVP style using a new password feature, which isn't an online commitment, but rather for players at the same PS2.

In fact, the laundry list of available options for Rogue is staggering. What's more, publishing of the game in the states was held back until Level-5 could tweak the gameplay, which shows the level of affection they held for the title. The team even added an entirely new planet, outside of the main quest. The localization is intense; it's almost as if there's a full new version of the game available for fans in the west.

My only gripes about the whole game are the plot and pace. In terms of gameplay, puzzles, graphics, music, options, and sheer combat control, Rogue Galaxy has a lot to offer. It's Level-5, after all, and every game they've released has been a success. It's a shame, then that the game feels plodding. With sped-up cutscenes, or a more unique story, Rogue wouldn't have just been exceptionally built. It would have been maddeningly addictive.

score 8.5

Real time battles combine with the "Revelation Flow" to keep the fighting fresh.

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	NIS America	Available	February
Developer	GUST	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Ar Tonelico

Open her mind...

words **Dave Halverson**

Let's face it...RPGs are in ample supply. More than ever before it's a buyer's market. Good time's fo-sho, but what of originality? If you've played the obvious cream of the crop; what next? Is there an RPG among us that offers something totally different? Funny I should ask because yes, there is: Ar Tonelico. It may look like the latest Atelier Iris clone but this here is a "moe" style RPG...meaning we get the girl; literally. But I digress. Things get underway as the city of Platina, nestled high atop the World Tower of Sol Shell, faces a familiar adversary; evil programs that manifest themselves as virtual baddies (a.k.a. viruses) that took over the world once upon a time. Platina's only hope lies in retrieving the hymn crystal that the three holy maidens used to seal the Virus through song the last time they infiltrated. But they need the purger to get it, and so Lady Shurelia sends her best knight, Lyner, speeding away in an airship to retrieve the item. He doesn't get far however before he's shot down, crash landing in the Lower World where he finds his second adversary; the Tanba. I could easily write pages on each of the game's systems so I'll attempt to simplify how AT rolls. The gameplay on the field consists of 2D sprite-based characters (cute little versions of their studly and/or voluptuous selves) traversing pre-rendered environments--like FF VII if the characters were hand-drawn--while the cities are handled via menu where clicking on a destination takes you to that sector; a layered but single-screen piece of the larger metropolis. The battles feature the same 2D sprites in beautiful 2D settings, and in between Gust integrates cinematic 3D, creating an interesting and beautiful patchwork of styles.

What sets Ar Tonelico apart is its item creation, called Grathmelding (a deep alchemy system that allows you to create your own potions, enhancements etc.) and the conversation system, which leads to "diving" into your Reyvateil's "soulspace". Reyvateils are beautiful maidens who serve a male counterpart into songs – the game's weapons, and healing – although they won't open their minds to just anyone. They require reliable partners. The more she trusts you the more she opens up and the deeper you can dive into her at a Dive Shop near you, where you take your Reyvateil to enter her cosmosphere; essentially a map of her mind that you must penetrate to slay her inner-demons and craft song magic by translating her feelings into songs. If this sounds like a clever play on intercourse, that's because it is. The game makes no bones about its male/female, er,

"The more she trusts you the more she opens up and the deeper you can dive into her..."

If you know the right people, and the password, the Lower World has some great deals.

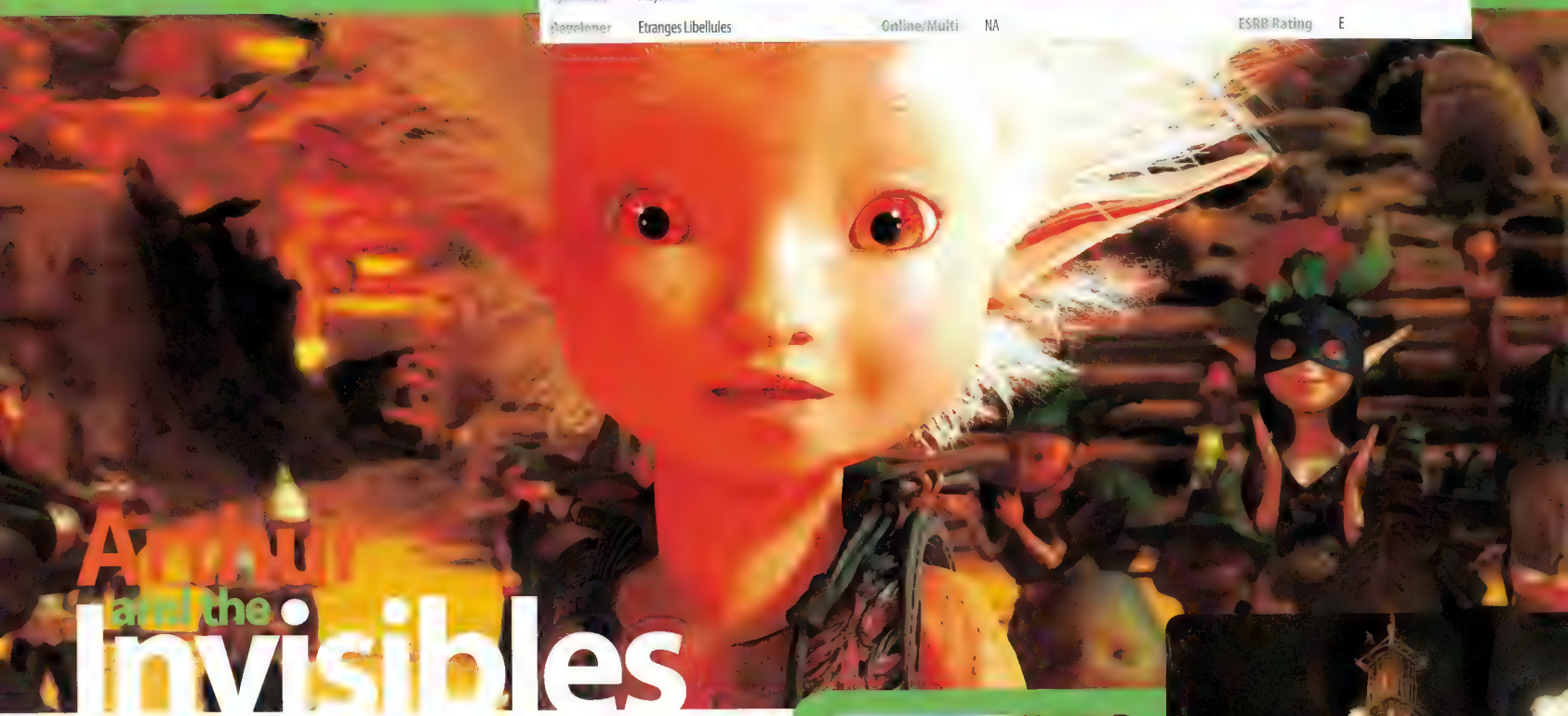
"Ar Tonelico pretty much has it all. The story and especially pacing is fantastic; the music truly special..."

connection. It's all done via innuendo in a very cheeky way however, so fear not. The world's most uptight society (which also happens to be the porn center of the world) is in no immediate danger.

Ar Tonelico pretty much has it all. The story and especially pacing is fantastic; the music truly special, the battles are incredibly engaging via the Revyateils, and the art is simply gorgeous. The full-size character cutouts used for the game's conversing may be the best that Gust has ever done, and that's saying something. As for the localization; aside from a few ill-placed one-liners (in the first town a little girl exclaims "My Mommy said knock you out," argh) it's pretty great. I especially appreciate the promiscuous tone. When Lyner switches Reyvateils from Misha to Aurica, Krusche exclaims "Misha, you grew tits!" I guess you had to be there. I suggest you make haste. **play**

Ar Tonelico score **8.5**

Systems	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Atari	Available	January
Developer	Etranges Libellules	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	E



Arthur and the Invisibles

Now appearing

words **Dave Halverson**

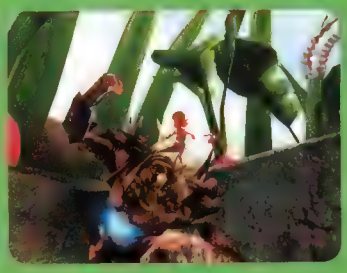
As movie games go it's rare that we get anything original, so Arthur and the Invisibles is a welcome commodity even if the movie is getting unjustly hammered by critics.

At the heart of the game is teamwork, a direction that can render a game great or lame, and it's a fine line. In order to succeed the design must truly call for character cooperation and offer diverse terrain fit for each, given whichever player has the spotlight. Arthur does this exceedingly well. Although the narrative throughout is akin to an onboard strategy guide, the gameplay itself is so rich that you soon realize its genius. The characters are simply conversing; helping each other along as if you weren't there. Aside from them reminding you when someone is in need of healing (dragonfly eggs; mmm-mmm good) it's almost as if you're the fourth character. This may be the best integrated help I've come across. It's needed too, in order to deal with the game's infinite series of environmental puzzles.

Between the deftly handled melee sequences which grow in intensity as the friends deal with Maltazard's minions in Oz-like fashion (sans flying monkeys), Princess Selenia, Betamech and Arthur must fight their way to Necropolis by way of the land of the Minimoys and the real world, emerging in Arthur's yard where blades of grass are as thick as bean stalks and insects towering beasties. The puzzle-action is heavily switch (a.k.a. flagstone) based, although most lead to harrowing bits of platforming, ranging from standard jumping fare to harrowing vertical scrambles and God of War style boss battles. Elsewhere the Panzer Dragoon-like mosquito shooting bits almost deserve a game of their own. Visually the game is striking, delivering the very best textures the PS2 is capable of together with stunning horticulture and among the best last-gen character models ever seen. On the down side, freeing Mul-Muls (the game's requisite side-quest) does get a bit long in the tooth (although it is optional) and the Tomb Raideresque soundtrack is an acquired taste (I favor music throughout any game) but most of all, Arthur and the Invisibles is hard. I found the difficulty perfect but I fear that the game's target demo may find it surprisingly difficult. This is definitely intermediate to expert territory. Seeing as how none of the above drawbacks actually are, Arthur and the Invisibles deserves a spin on your PS2…and a next-gen port if the film manages to escape the stodgy press corps's evil grasp. **play**

Arthur and the Invisibles — score 8.0

Bosses are dealt with God of War style, via corresponding button presses.



"Arthur and the Invisibles deserves a spin on your PS2…and a next-gen port..."

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XBOX 360™

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Capcom	Available	January
Developer	Capcom	Online/Multi	1-16 player	ESRB Rating	T

Lost Planet
Extreme Condition

Nonstop action across the frozen tundra

words Brady Fiechter

Yes, you get to ride these and blow stuff up.

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition makes no apologies for its ceaseless action. For all the modern bells and whistles and story breaks, this is an action game in the most traditional definition of the genre. A little restraint may have resulted in a stronger game, but Lost Planet: Extreme Condition has its grand moments when you escape a wild shootout in supreme satisfaction of your dirty work.

The game takes place in a visually stellar landscape comprised of arctic snow, and lots of it. This is a frozen wasteland of a world, a place where giant bug-like creatures rule and the conditions are so severe, surviving without special thermal suits is impossible. It's awfully white and bleak a lot of the time, but occasionally the arresting vista, indoor area and stellar special effects alert you to the fact that Lost Planet is truly next-gen.

I found Lost Planet to be a mixed bag when you're fighting human opponents, which make up only a small part of the larger squadron of ice creatures that dominant the land. Human confrontations are more subdued and they're not the smartest lads, but the longer-range thinking and the level design around it made for some strong battles.

The enemies are massive at times, requiring careful attention to weak points. Hit them enough and they freeze up, shattering with a nice glass effect. Huge boss battles are brutal and intense, the highlight of the combat system. You really have to seek out their patterns or its inevitable death, recalling more classic confrontations that put your patience and skills to the ultimate test.

In this frigid land, you need thermal energy to survive. Everything you kill, including squishy pods and other weird growths, give off this energy in death. It's a fun spin on the tried-and-true collection mechanic; you need these "coins" to survive as your thermal meter counts down before you'll start freezing to death. If the game didn't already have a brutal sense of urgency, this ratchets it up that much more.

There is so much ammunition to expend in the game, weapons are buried and scattered nearly every step of the way for constant pick up. There's nothing overly creative about their look or use, leaving the mech operating stretches to give the game its most unique personality. Known as vital suits, there are a variety of these machines to jump into, and a variety of enemy kind to wage battle against.

Another highlight to the game is the grappling technique, yet it's hard not to desire even more applications for its use. Grappling down holes while blasting away, latching onto ledges to launch to the next treacherous section, or even catapulting onto an enemy are all part of the fun. It's all pretty straight forward and could use more variety and pacing, but as an original work from a company who continues to impress, Lost Planet: Extreme Conditions satisfies. **play**

"Huge boss battles are brutal and intense, the highlight of the combat system."

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

SCORE 8.0

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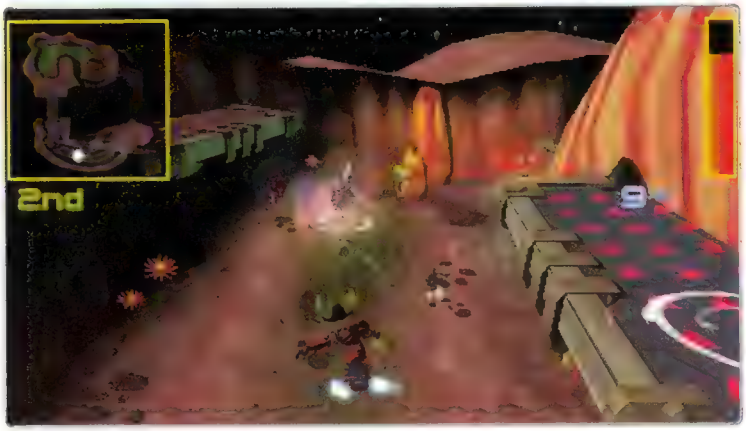
Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	SCEA
Developer	High Impact Games	**Available**	February

Some of the adventure had been sucked out of the Ratchet & Clank series in the online-focused Ratchet & Clank: Deadlocked, but with this original PSP title, the series feels a bit more like the R&C of what I would call the good old days. Developed by High Impact Games, who consist of ex-Insomniac talent, this latest in the stellar series stays very true to the gameplay and structure you've come to expect, while mixing things up bit with a new armor system and a few new weapons—the swarming Bee Mine Glove is a favorite—to join a large returning arsenal.

The story follows the dynamic duo as they lounge on vacation, disrupted by some not-as-cute-as-she seems girl named Luna, who begs for their heroic assistance. While past Ratchet games have stayed fairly straight-edged in their sci-fi settings, the story will take you into much more surreal territory, like a dream-inspired level where floating eyeballs dot the landscape.

Past games have dabbled with providing Clank his own tasks to perform, and Size Matters takes that a step further. You'll get to take him through his routine of commanding a minibot troup, drive vehicles and deal with missions in giant form. Emphasis is also being placed on new armor sets, which when collected provide various types of power-ups depending on how you piece them together. **Brady Fiechter**



After Burner: Black Falcon

System(s)	PSP	**Publisher**	Sega
Developer	Planet Moon	**Available**	March

It might be poor tactical strategy to fly an F-14 into combat while it's decked out in orange-and-black tiger stripes, but After Burner: Black Falcon is about as close to a tactical flight simulator as, say, the state of New Jersey is to being a lush tropical paradise that doesn't smell like a thousand men's armpits on a hot summer's day.

Black Falcon soars in the contrails of its arcade cousin, After Burner: Climax. The game offers fast-paced flight combat with 19 real-world planes including the F-14 Tomcat, the F-15, and the F-18. Players will be able to choose either fighters or bombers, and then customize their planes with decorative skins (who wouldn't want to be shot out of the skies by a plane emblazoned with the Sega logo?), and alter its combat capabilities by augmenting its weaponry. Mission-based play allows would-be Top Guns select from three different pilots, each of whom has a different motivation and set of objectives.

Action-heavy gameplay takes place on battlefields such as ice-caked hells and desert canyons; all feature destructible elements that will trigger scripted scenes when they're brought down. Falcon will further be augmented by 4-player ad hoc play, and cooperative action; unfriendly, missile-filled skies should never be flown alone. **Greg Orlando**

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Platypus

score 7.5

System	PSP	Online/Multi	Wi-Fi (Ad Hoc) 2-player
Developer	Mumbo Jumbo	Available	Now
Publisher	Idigicon	ESRB Rating	E

Reports of a UFO have been swirling around the Sony PSP. Although details are sketchy we do know that a small company out of Dallas, Texas "Mumbo Jumbo" has launched a strange phenomenon called a "side-scrolling shooter." In the game you move a space ship to-and-fro as armada after armada attempt to shoot you down. The "stages" are divided into 5 quadrants, the fifth of which contains a huge "boss." The game is also fashioned entirely from clay and contains strange synthesizer music—wait I'm getting a news flash..."techno" they say, and is reportedly "simplistic and fun," whatever that means.

We'll have more on this breaking story as it develops. **Dave Halverson**

Star Wars: Lethal Alliance

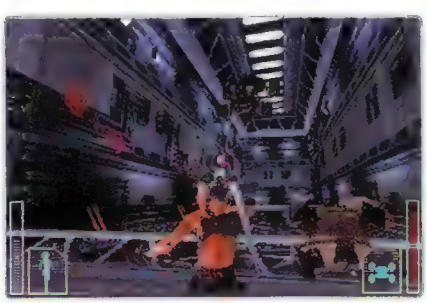
score 4.5

System	Nintendo DS, PSP (DS Reviewed)	Online/Multi	1-4
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal	Available	Now
Publisher	Ubisoft	ESRB Rating	T

The Lethal Alliance of uninspired third-person shooting and dull platforming elements pretty much dooms the newest Star Wars game.

Get past the lackluster third-person perspective gameplay and Star Wars: Lethal Alliance offers a heroine who's neither particularly appealing nor especially interesting. Alien Rianna is standard video game fare, bare-midriffed and gun-toting. It's her lot in life to clear enemies from rooms, work in tandem with a robot to hack security stations, shoot enemies aplenty in first-person cannon sequences, and engage in jumping bits where—surprise!—the evil Galactic Empire has inexplicably set up a series of rising and falling platforms. So, then, Lethal Alliance fails on two distinct levels: It lets you play uninteresting sequences as a character that will be lucky to emerge as a footnote in the Star Wars universe.

The game tries to stab at innovation by making Rianna work in concert with a robot. Yet this means players, try as they might to avoid it, will have to suffer through action as the robot, wandering through gray, staticky corridors (simulating, one supposes, an automaton's vision) looking for a button to press. In a galaxy far, far away, maybe one ruled by accountants or, better yet, robot accountants, this is, in fact, "fun." **Greg Orlando**

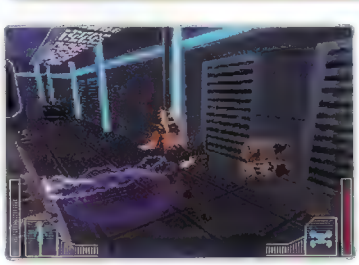


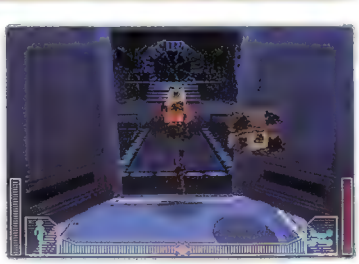
preview Full Auto 2: Battlelines

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Sega
Developer	Deep Fried Entertainment	Available	February

Once again, destruction matters. Sega's taking Full Auto 2: Battlelines to the PSP in 2007 and, despite the change in venue, it wants game fans to know the scope and magnitude of Battlelines' vehicle-themed havoc remains undiminished. Battlelines for the PSP is not a port of the PS3 title, Sega emphasizes. The two games will share a common play style, of course, and the music from the console game will be included on the handheld version. Developer Deep Fried Entertainment plans to offer new cars, tracks, and weapons for the game, as well as such PSP-specific features as 4-player ad hoc competitions and game sharing wherein multiple people with PSPs can race using one game UMD.

An early build for Battlelines hinted the developers have everything well in hand. Destructible environments allowed for players to crash through huge glass windows and perform special attacks where, say, overhanging platforms could be targeted with a car's weapons and then knocked down to either wipe out opponents unfortunate enough to be crushed by its fall or create a permanent obstacle. These destruction matters moments will be included in every track, giving players the opportunity to not only smash the competition in style, but to outthink it as well. **Greg Orlando**





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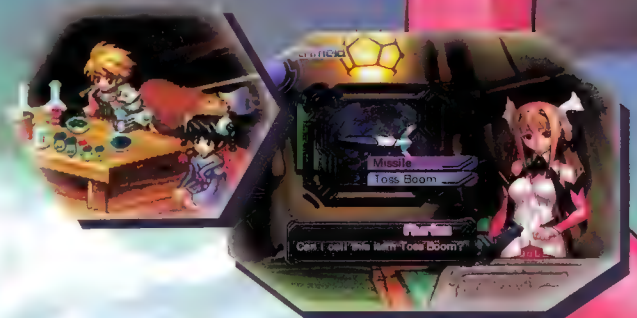

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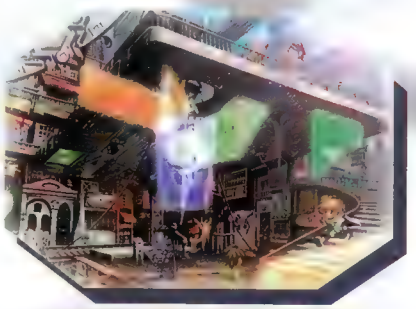

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TEEN T
Language
Mild Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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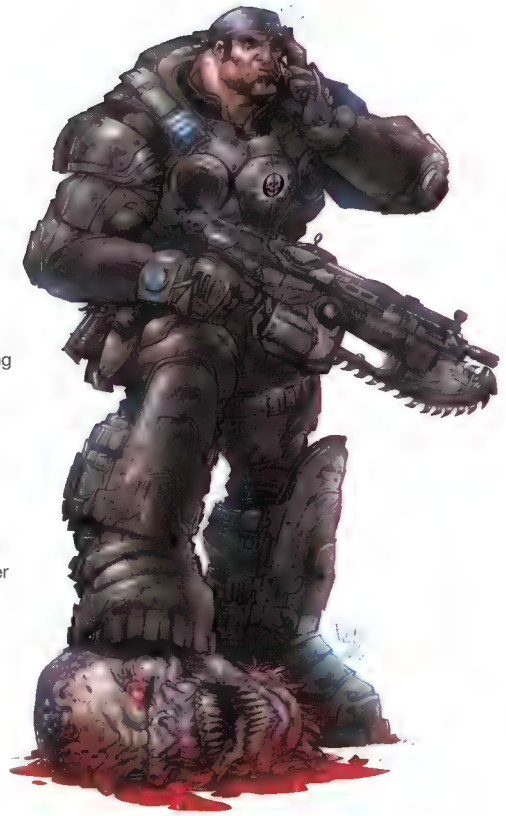
2020 YEAR IN REVIEW

We won wars, slayed demons, foiled [illegible]. Went on epic adventures, [illegible]. We [illegible] some beats [illegible].

BEST ACTION SHOOTING

gears of war microsoft / xbox 360



Was there a more visually arresting game this year? If you're talking sheer impact, no way. From the architecture to the artistry to the raw design of it all, Gears of War was mind blowing. Equally revolutionary was the duck-and-cover shootouts, which managed to feel truly different. There's never been anything like it.

RUNNER UP

resistance: fall of man sony / ps3

BEST ACTION PLATFORM

sonic the hedgehog sega / xbox 360

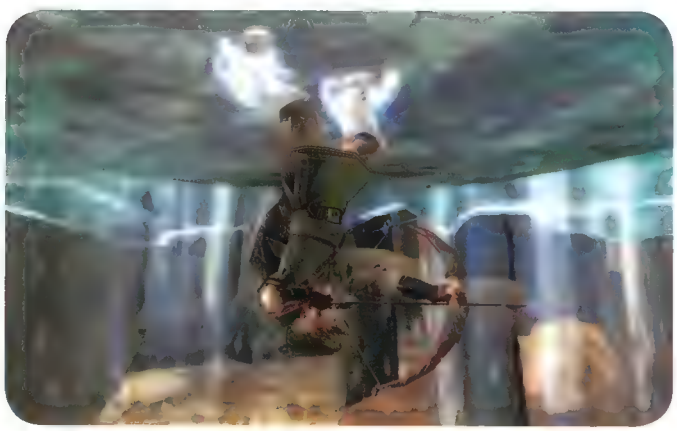
Although their infamous flies are still circling the ointment, Sonic Team delivered an immense hedgehog opus incorporating every series mainstay around 3 vastly different adventures featuring Sonic, Shadow and newcomer Silver. Everything Sonic fans love is in here riding on some of the most exhilarating gameplay ever seen on any system.

RUNNER UP

the legend of spyro: a new beginning sierra / ps2

BEST ACTION ADVENTURE

the legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii



With so many different ways to fight, and so many puzzles to unravel, Zelda was an obvious choice for action adventure. In fact, we kinda feel sorry for other games released during Zelda years; they're not just up against Nintendo's legendary design, but they're also fighting the nostalgia that each new Zelda game evokes.

RUNNER UP

okami capcom / ps2

BEST OPEN WORLD (SANDBOX)

just cause
eidos / xbox 360

As open world gaming goes Eidos' Just Cause re-wrote much of the book. Aside from the usual bevy of missions, the ability to zipline onto various aircraft, fly around the island and then sky dive onto a moving car or into hostile territory helped make Just Cause this year's clear victor. Stunning vehicles and shoot outs didn't hurt either.

RUNNER UP

bully rockstar / ps2

BEST FIGHTING

street fighter alpha anthology
capcom / ps2

For a collection of decade-old games to be the best fighting game of the year...is both sad, and a testament to the heights of competitive gaming Capcom reached in the 90s. As a genre these polished, tight, and precise fighters have essentially ceased to exist. Pick up the Alpha collection and reminisce about what the genre used to be.

RUNNER UP

dead or alive 4
tecmo / xbox 360

BEST ANIME-BASED

naruto ultimate ninja
namco bandai / ps2

Just as we hoped, the merging of Namco and Bandai has resulted in a new era for anime based gaming. They now own the space, and more importantly more often than not pump out quality titles such as the Smash Bros.-ish Ultimate Ninja which now stands as the best anime based fighter ever.. until the sequel hits.

RUNNER UP

samurai champloo: sidetracked
namco bandai games / ps2

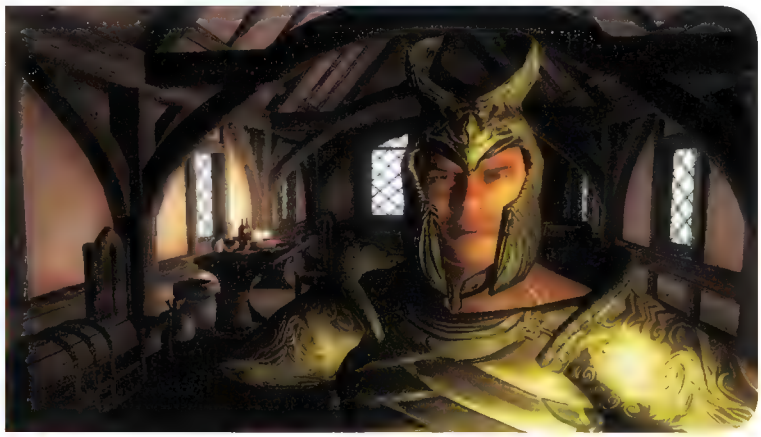
BEST ROLE PLAYING GAME

final fantasy xii square enix / ps2

A role-playing game is only as good as the story it tells. Sure, the mechanics of the title, the options, the weaponry, and the design are all important, but the success of the game eventually rides on the shoulders of its narrative. The story is the sword; all of these other elements are its polish. And FFXII tells one sharp story.

RUNNER UP

suikoden v konami / ps2



BEST ACTION-RPG

elder scrolls iv: oblivion bethesda / xbox360, pc

Here's a monster adventure to trample all other monster adventures. The action-laden Oblivion sweeps across 100 or so hours' worth of story, allowing players to build their own hero and send him out in a huge world to see if he can't permanently shut the gates to a nether realm. Its magnificent, open-ended play and endless contributions to the cause of monster-whacking won Oblivion this award.

RUNNER UP

.hack// GU namco bandai / ps2

BEST STRATEGY RPG

disgaea 2 nis america / ps2

NIS America knows how to please their brood, and Disgaea is their big bright shining star. As strategy RPGs go, none can match D2's concentration of story and superlative grid based battles; perhaps the best ever given the selection of classes and abilities, combined with a fabulous soundtrack and top notch voice acting.

RUNNER UP

the lord of the rings: battle for middle earth II ea / xbox 360

BEST MOVIE- OR TV-BASED GAME

cars thq / xbox 360

Talking cars burned virtual rubber in this cute, oftentimes whimsical adventure that elegantly blended open-world exploration with racing challenges. Amid a sea of uninspired movie- and TV show to video game translations, Cars stood out for its solid gameplay, expansion of the film's themes and characters, and sense of overwhelming fun.

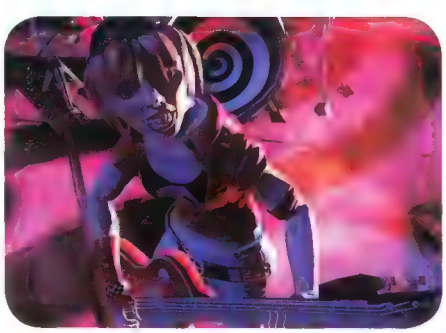
RUNNER UP

viva piñata microsoft / xbox 360

BEST MUSIC-BASED GAME

guitar hero II red octane / ps2

Although our collective young boy dreams of asking Cleveland if it was ready to rock died out some years ago, Guitar Hero II reminded us that you are never too old to hammer out Freebird as originally performed by Lynyrd Skynrd. And for those about to rock with a plastic guitar in front of a TV screen, we indeed salute you.



RUNNER UP

elite beat agents nintendo / nds

BEST RACING FANTASY

ridge racer 7 bandai namco games / ps3

Take the time-tested surgical racing precision of Ridge Racer and marry it with 1080p, high-defintion visuals...yes, we have a winner. In a climate where real, licensed cars and proper gear ratios are of utmost importance, Namco taught us what really matters is solid gameplay.

RUNNER UP

burnout revenge thq / xbox 360

BEST TRADITIONAL SHOOTER

xyanide playlogic / xbox

Shooters don't exist any more, yet here was a great one that came out of nowhere and managed to excite with a flair for the oldschool with a touch of new. There was an esoteric sci-fi air to the surreal settings that made Xyanide a unique experience within the frenetic shooter action.

RUNNER UP

snoopy vs. red baron namco bandai games/ ps2

BEST RACING SIM

moto gp 2006 thq / xbox 360

Climax delivered big time this year, elevating two-wheeled racing over anything 4 wheels could muster with their latest game in the Moto GP series. GP 2006 is an acquired taste but once you find the groove there's nothing quite like it, and the addition of bonus tracks and super bikes keeps it oven fresh for the duration. This is next-gen racing done right.

RUNNER UP

test drive unlimited atari / xbox 360

2006 CONSOLE GAME OF THE YEAR

the legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii

2006 MOBILE WINNERS

BEST RPG
final fantasy iii
square enix / nds

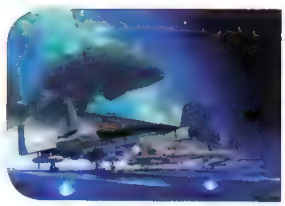
While FFIII isn't half the game that Final Fantasy V is (on GBA), we're tired of the handheld RPG genre being defined by ports of old Square games. FFIII may be a remake, but with its stunning new 3D engine it may as well be a whole new game.

RUNNER UP
yggdra union atlus / gba

BEST ACTION PLATFORM
new super mario bros.
nintendo / nds

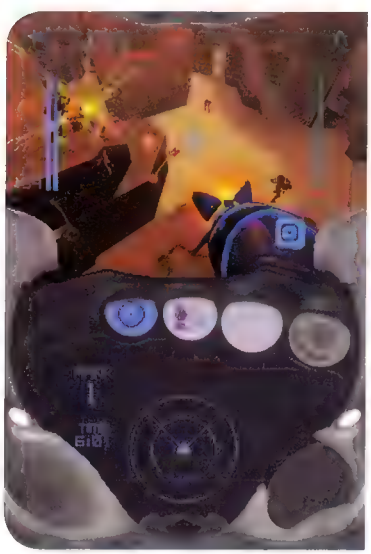
Platforming on the handhelds ruled this year, with a number of fantastic games showcasing oldschool style with modern visual grace and control. New Super Mario Bros. stood tall at the top with its challenge, style, character and absolutely masterful craft.

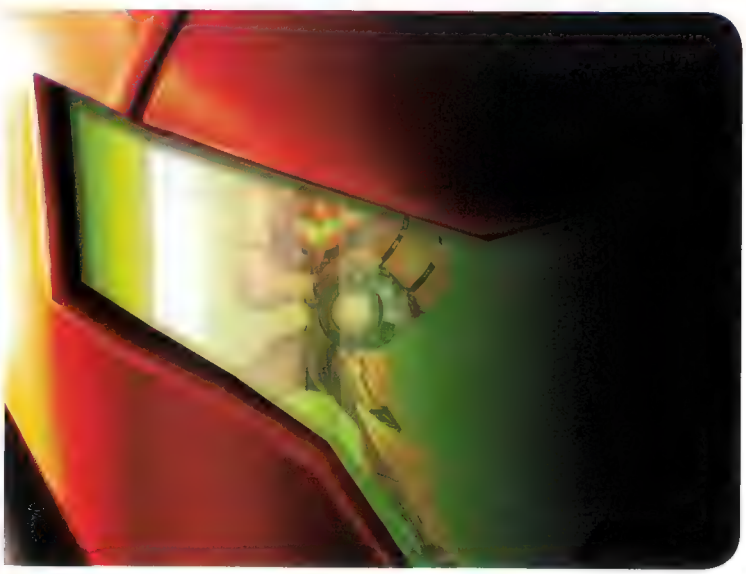
RUNNER UP
ultimate ghosts n goblins capcom / psp



BEST ACTION SHOOTER
metroid prime hunters nintendo / nds

The control took some getting used to, but once you dialed it all in, Metroid Prime: Hunters captured the classic spirit of Metroid on handheld—in impressive 3D! We await a sequel...





RUNNER UP
killzone liberation scea / psp

BEST TRADITIONAL SHOOTER
gradius collection konami / psp

Talk about a genre that has fallen into hard times—there were only a handful of eligible shooters released this year, and they couldn't stand up to this collection of classics from decades ago. Get it in gear, Treasure!

RUNNER UP
snoopy vs. red baron namco bandai / psp

BEST ALTERNATIVE GAME
elite beat agents nintendo / nds

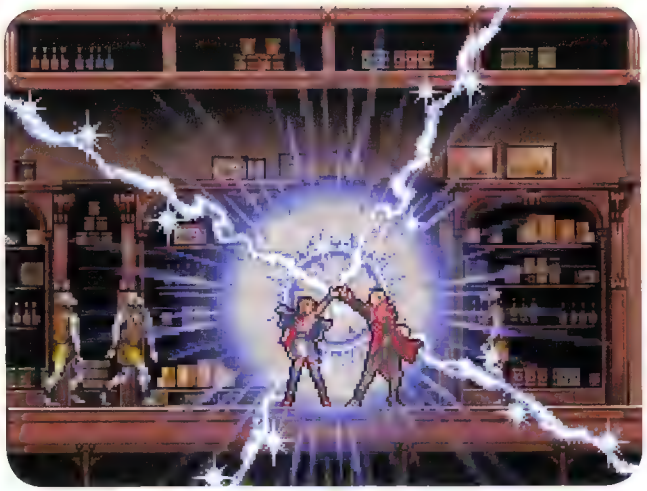
One of Japan's best DS games came to our shores, with improved gameplay and a soundtrack more fitting an American audience. A true hidden gem of Nintendo's dual-screened handheld that should not be missed.

RUNNER UP
locoroco scea /psp

BEST RACING
outrun 2006 sega / psp

PSP was meant to provide "console-quality gaming in the palm of your hand", but precious few games actually do. Outrun 2006 is one that actually delivers on the promise. For all intents and purposes identical to the PlayStation 2 version, this magical drive shower gets my vote for finest handheld racing game of all time.

RUNNER UP
racer driver 2006 codemasters / psp



BEST ACTION/ADVENTURE
castlevania: portrait of ruin konami / nds

Castlevania's reign on the DS continues to enrich the bloodline.This time around Iga and company thrilled us with massive Bloodlines reminiscent bosses, a beautiful female counterpart, and an anime guise complete with a deep compelling story.

RUNNER UP
mgs portable ops konami /psp

BEST FIGHTING
tekken dr namco bandai / psp

Tekken: Dark Resurrection isn't just the best handheld fighting game of the year, it's the best handheld fighting game ever. Home console quality in virtually every respect (to say nothing of its getting-close-to-perfection balance), Tekken: DR showed us what was possible on PSP...should budget permit.

RUNNER UP
guilty gear judgement majesco / psp

mobile game of the year

castlevania: portrait of ruin

konami / nds

The DS/PSP generation has transformed the once-miserable handheld marketplace into a haven for exceptional original titles, especially ones based on the great franchises of yesteryear. New Super Mario Bros., Ultimate Ghosts n' Goblins and Elite Beat Agents made this the most competitive year ever, but once again Iga stole the crown with a pitch-perfect Castlevania title.
Portrait of Ruin's dual-character system worked beautifully, an impressive achievement considering how often such ideas have failed in the past. The game's graphics and music remain top-notch, the boss design hit new heights, and the bonus unlockables made an already lengthy game even more substantial. (That goodie-filled preorder bonus pack certainly didn't suck either.) The Castlevania series may be left with only a small cult of fanatical fans, but Iga delivers for us every time he steps up to the plate.

RUNNER UP

ultimate ghosts n goblins capcom / psp

etc.

BEST COMMERCIAL

red steel (you suck)

RUNNER UP

gears of war (mad world)

BEST COLLECTION

sega genesis collection sega / ps2

RUNNER UP

capcom classics coll. 2 psp

MOST UNDERRATED GAME

sonic the hedgehog
sega / xbox 360

RUNNER UP

untold legends dk soe / ps3

BEST NEW CHARACTER OTHER

amatersu (okami)

RUNNER UP

silver (sonic the hedgehog)

BEST NEW CHARACTER MALE

marcus fenix (gears of war)

RUNNER UP

kazuma (yakuza)

BEST RETURNING CHARACTER FEMALE

lara croft (tomb raider)

RUNNER UP

etna (disgaea 2)

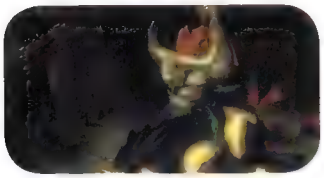
BEST RETURNING CHARACTER MALE

link (twilight princess)

RUNNER UP

georg prime (suikoden v)

etc.



BEST NEW CHARACTER FEMALE

zala (untold legends: dark kingdom)

RUNNER UP

midna
(the legend of zelda: twilight princess)

BEST ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

untold legends: dark kingdom soe / ps3

RUNNERS UP

rule of rose atlus / ps2
sonic the hedgehog sega / xbox 360

BEST ADAPTED SOUNDTRACKS

guitar hero II red octane / ps2

RUNNER UP

t hawk project 8 next-gen

BEST STORY

rule of rose atlus / ps2

RUNNER UP

the legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii, gc

BEST WII VIRTUAL CONSOLE GAME

gunstar heroes
sega / wii vc

RUNNER UP

super mario 64 nintendo / wii vc

BEST X BOX LIVE GAME

contra konami / xbox 360

RUNNER UP

lumines live Q ent. / xbox 360

BEST BOSS BATTLES

the legend of zelda: twilight princess

RUNNERS UP

yazmat (final fantasy xii)
brauner (castlevania: portrait of ruin)
frank west vs. fat cop (dead rising)

BEST KIDS GAME

bionicle heroes eidos / 360

RUNNER UP

nicktoon's battle for volcano island thq / gamecube

BEST SPECIAL EDITION

console

gears of war
microsoft / xbox 360

mobile

castlevania: portrait of ruin konami / nds

BEST BOX

viva piñata microsoft / xbox360

RUNNER UP

gears of war se microsoft / xbox 360

MOST INNOVATIVE NEW GAME

wii sports nintendo / wii

RUNNER UP

viva pinata microsoft / xbox 360

MOST ORIGINAL/ UNIQUE NEW GAME

steambot chronicles atlus / ps2

RUNNER UP

viva pinata microsoft / xbox 360

MOST OVERRATED

scarface: the world is yours universal /ps2

RUNNER UP

dead rising capcom / xbox 360

BEST SPECIAL EFFECTS

gears of war
microsoft / xbox 360

RUNNER UP

untold legends soe / ps3

BEST CINEMAS

final fantasy xii
square enix / ps2

RUNNER UP

sonic the hedgehog xbox 360

BEST LEVEL DESIGN

okami capcom / ps2

RUNNER UP

the legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii, gc

BEST CO-OP GAMEPLAY

gears of war
microsoft / xbox 360

RUNNER UP

death jr. root of evil konami / psp

BEST GRAPHICS OF THE YEAR

gears of war
microsoft / xbox 360

RUNNER UP

resistance: fall of man
sony / ps3

THE OH-GOD PLEASE NO MORE AWARD

egregious product placement

RUNNER UP

urban themed games

BIGGEST BUMMER

ps3 launch anarchy

RUNNER UP

sold out wiis

DAVE HALVERSON
editor in chief

As we stand at the threshold of what promises to be the best year ever, let us give thanks for the year that was. Forgetting for a second that gaming was late night monologue fodder for unprecedented weeks on end for all the wrong reasons, let's focus on the positive. When all was said and done, all the ammo spent, we ended up with two great new consoles on top of extraordinary new experiences like Gears of War and Okami along with a cavalcade of great sequels and perhaps the greatest RPG of all time; not bad. For me to pick a tactical shooter as my game of the year, well, it's never happened, and likely never will again. Gears of War had a profound effect on me, but not as profound as the absence of my beloved platforming epics. I request an immediate inquiry!

"Gears of War had a profound effect on me..."

01. gears of war microsoft / xbox 360
No female lead, no critters, and no platforming yet here stands Gears of War as my clear choice for the most superlative game of 2007. Does this uncharacteristic vote make me a graphics whore? I think not. If Gears was merely the most meticulously detailed tactical action shooter ever devised it couldn't possibly outshine Twilight Princess, but it's so much more. Beyond the pristine third person shooting is one of those rarest of games that actually elevates its genre. Gears, more so than any game before it, in my opinion, delivers a truly cinematic experience. The camera work and overall production is simply without equal and the set pieces are of legendary caliber. See what happens when one of the world's greatest FPS studios decides to add...a character! Let this be a lesson to floating torso's everywhere.

02. legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii
I promised myself that I wouldn't let Nintendo off the hook for delaying Twilight a full year just to make it work on the Wii, yet here I am once again, in so deep that I could care less. If not for the Twilight side of the game I wouldn't be nearly as absorbed but it is undeniably the most spectacular Zelda since Ocarina. That said; the erector set of play mechanics that is the genius of Zelda cannot overcome the feeling that Gears of War stirs in the pit of my stomach. This was supposed to be my game of 2005.

03. okami capcom / ps2
Make one of the greatest games of all time and...close up shop! Isn't that special?! That two games appeared that I like better than Okami to steal its place as my game of the year is a miracle. That too few bought it to elevate it to franchise status however was sadly, expected. One thing is for sure; Okami is among the greatest PS2 games ever created up there with Ico and God of War. Nobody can take that away from Clover, wherever they are.

04. castlevania portrait of ruin konami / nds
I'm through asking Iga for a next-gen 2D Castlevania. Not only will he never make one, but I've recently seen what next-gen 2D looks like and if he did I can honestly say that my head would explode. So for now, I will continue to stand in awe as he somehow continues to create better and better DS versions; although I can't imagine it getting any better than Portrait on a handheld system. The addition of the dual character system together with the Bloodlines meets Symphony trappings and deep story (I smell an anime) earn PoR a place among the best games in the series. Next up...a little surprise on PSP.

A Kameo cameo
Replaying Kameo over the break made me realize just how miraculous it is. Launch games usually run at half capacity but Rare tricked us. Kameo remains the 360s best game (to me) both visually and in terms of depth. Will Rare games reign supreme on 360 as they once did on SNES and N64? I say yes. Pay her a visit and see why.

05. ff xii square enix / ps2
I got my wish for an RPG with seamless field battles, but who would have imagined it would end up a 100 plus hour slice of heaven? How fitting that the king of RPGs would be the one to retool them. A few years ago I was done with RPGs but thanks to Level 5, Namco/Bandai, NIS America, and of course Square Enix, I'm back in the fold. XII is the epitome of exquisite character and world design and so rich story wise that it's hard to fathom how they'll ever top it. But we always say that don't we.

06. sonic the hedgehog sega / xbox 360
Warts and all I'll take one game as bold and diverse as Sonic over any ten cookie cutter platformers. Take no heed in the words of anyone who hasn't beaten the game in its entirety. Don't let the naysayers keep you from the chrome floors and majestic music in White Acropolis; the methodical assault of the Aquatic Zone, or the telekinetic marvel that is Silver. Exhilarating speed runs, methodical assaults and epic boss battles await the true blue along with unprecedented story and cinemas for a platformer. Tails can't fly for s--t (he's in all but 15 minutes of the game) Rouge is a pain to pry from walls and the game has it's share of sticky bugs, but when you make a game this big and diverse inside of two years, they go with the territory. Overall there's NO GAME LIKE this. A clean load-free version of this game might have been my game of the year.

07. motor storm (import) scei / ps3
I'll admit that upon seeing Motor Storm in action for the first time I got weak in the knees. Real-time track deformation has been a long time dream of mine so to actually feel it along with the stunning physics and visuals I almost felt guilty wanting the game to be any good...but it is SO GOOD. Evolution Studios has raised the bar so high for off-road racing the next guy will need a plane.

08. daxter scea / psp
Daxter does for the PSP what God of War did for the PS2, essentially tapping its full potential while fashioning a game that should come with a dribble cup. Easily the king of platformers on any handheld it's criminal that the game didn't get a bigger push from Sony, but if your looking for the ultimate action game for the PSP, here it is. I can't to see what Ready at Dawn does next.

09. ultimate ghosts 'n goblins capcom / psp
Few companies have stayed as true to their fans through the years as Capcom. For better or for worse they refuse to sell out, choosing instead to either innovate with games like Killer 7, Okami, Viewtiful Joe, and P.N. 03, or cater to their faithful by nurturing brands like Strider (which is due for another sequel) Mega Man, Resident Evil, Street Fighter, and Ghosts 'n Goblins, which they took to an entirely new level in 2006. One of the most beautiful 2D games on any system the gameplay also received a new coat of mystical paint via 3D graphics, new weapons and magic, a shield system, items menu, per level saves and respawning points. A good set of headphones and this game in your PSP is a sacred event.

10. viva piñata microsoft / xbox 360
I had words for dinner the day Viva Piñata came in, a game I deemed an illegal procedure coming from my beloved Rare. As I pined for a Battletoads or Jet Force Gemini sequel they decided on a Piñata simulation/TV tie-in? Next thing you know I'm livin' on Piñata Island, breeding this to feed that and getting all giddy every time I add a trinket to my garden.

BRADY FECHTER
executive editor

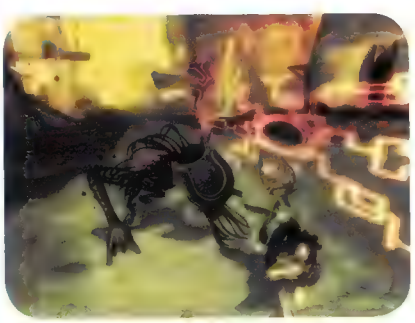
In 2006, executives crashed their million-dollar cars into light polls, sliced them in two, and lived to tell about it. PlayStation 3 hopefuls got tragically shot, stampeded, and robbed at gun point. Sony was routinely accused of mucking things up big time—5K on ebay, come on guys!?—while Nintendo showcased a graceful launch of a system that everyone seems to love. Industry detractors continued with legal moans, and no one cared to listen. E3 was canceled, and the industry collectively rejoiced. Great games were released throughout the year, and even a little originality and daring showed up.

And as for those games. The bad ones were soooo bad and by the usual numbers, the good ones were as consistently good as we've seen in a long while, coming to fruition in a transitional year as excitingly interesting as it was typical. The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess was the No 1 in my book to proclaim that games have the power to move—without technology yielding the energy. In fact, the heart of gaming beat quite nicely, even with the launch of PlayStation 3, which secured the phenomenal Resistance: Fall of Man; Xbox 360 gave me nothing this entertaining in the first year. Sequels continued their march, but the sequels were all as good as you'd expect, with the Final Fantasies of the world showing series at their peak. It wasn't an epochal year of any sorts, but 2006 leaves big hope for 2007 being The One.

"Great games were released throughout the year, and even a little originality and daring showed up."

01. legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii
Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess was the kind of game that made me feel like there was a purpose to living in its visions, like everything I did was indeed part of a hero's journey. The somber tone and darker spirit to the game took the Zelda formula to an almost unsettling place at times. A remarkable game.

02. okami capcom / ps2
Playing as a wolf was a pure joy in Okami. And exploring a breathtaking water-colored world was like nothing else in a game. It's rare to experience a game in which presentation drew from the



lifeblood of the gameplay; it's rare to find an experience this delicate and hypnotic. Too bad the presentation lacked a wide-screen format, because there was nothing else lacking in this magnificent adventure that blended everything I love about a great game.

03. gears of war
Gears of War and Resistance need to be in a tie, because there so different and equally flawed, and equally brilliant. Gears of War's grit and grime filled the screen with enough raw excitement and intensity to seriously raise stress levels. Cliffy B pulled off everything he needed to match thee bravado and hype, getting some to call this the best game in years. It's certainly is in co-op, where the duck-and-cover buddy combat takes the game to an even higher level.

04. resistance: fall of man sony / ps3
Weapons. It's all about the weapons. Sure, the game looks incredible at times, well crafted and highly refined in the way Insomniac games always are. But those weapons. The strategy involved in using them is perhaps the best the genre has seen. If you don't concentrate and pick wisely near the end of the game, you die. Period. An awesome first-person shooting experience—as much an action game in its own right as a typical FPS feel.

05. dead rising capcom / xbox 360
I love zombies. I love killing zombies. I love over-the-top gore and B-movie humor. I love seeing a game that contains some social commentary. I loved Dead Rising. Here was a game that took some awfully tired conventions and made them feel new. Using lawnmowers and sledge hammers and frying pans to mutilate zombies in an open mall kept me thrilled for way too long.

06. tomb raider: legend eidos / xbox 360
Welcome back, Lara. It's been a long, long time. Your new control made such a difference, your refined look was a nice touch. If the adventure felt awfully familiar, that's a good thing. This was my favorite Tomb Raider since the original.

honorable mentions:

Here's a few more games that deserved a look.

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence
Yoshi's Island 2
Prey
F.E.A.R.
Yakuza
Ghouls N Ghosts
Steambot Chronicles
Just Cause
Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin
Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy
Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter

07. the new super mario bros. nintendo / nds
Felt just like it did years ago on the NES, updated with modern touches that endlessly delighted. The game was challenging, visually wonderful, charming and loads of fun. That adds up to one of the best games of the year, and the only handheld game that penetrated the console-dominated list.

08. Final Fantasy x ii square enix / ps2
I've found too much disagreement with the Final Fantasy series since the magnificent Final Fantasy IX. With Final Fantasy XII, Square returned to the form I wanted, crafting a gorgeous world populated with characters I came to actually care for.

09. elder scrolls iv: oblivion bethesda / xbox 360
Elders Scrolls IV: Oblivion yearned for elegance and direction, but that doesn't mean it didn't soar with a tremendous sense of adventure. This was a massive role-playing experience, filled with memorable scenes and spirited encounters with enchanting inhabitants of a massive, engrossing world. What a feeling of freedom and belonging to an ancient place!

10. guitar hero 2 red octane / ps2
Guitar Hero 2 is a lot like Guitar Hero 1, and that's OK. It's a blast mainlining into the power of a rock star with a whole new set of songs.

GREG ORLANDO
senior editor

The year of our lord 2006 ended with a Christmas miracle: We all made it out alive.

It's genuinely hard to qualify a year. Surely the release of Wii and PlayStation 3 stand as defining moments, but 2006 didn't begin with people waiting on line upward of 30-plus hours for a piece of hardware, and it certainly didn't end with a lot of sad game fans unable to see what the fuss was about because someone—and there's no need to name names—couldn't get the goods to the stores. On a personal note, they've yet to build a disease debilitating and pain-inducing enough for me to wish on, or a stick sharp enough for me to jab through the body of, the scumbag who broke into my apartment one morning in November. I hope the PlayStation 3 you stole realizes what—and pardon my language here, please—a steaming asshole you are and shoots acid in your face and the acid scar reads "I Heart Kevin Federline." Also, I hope you die, bleeding out from 38 self-inflicted icepick stab wounds, and not because you took physical possessions from me, but because you robbed me of something wholly more precious—the belief that people are, essentially, good. It was a year for video games and video game fans. We got characters in Frank West, Marcus Fenix, Vaan, and Jimmy Hopkins. There was a new generation to celebrate and an old generation that did not go gently, as Dylan Thomas said. It really was good to play together, and my Jamelons, Karma and J. Jonah, are doing just fine, thank you very much.

"2006 didn't begin with people waiting on line upward of 30-plus hours for a piece of hardware."

01. gears of war microsoft / xbox 360
Celebrate the face-crushing love. The third-person tactical shooter Gears of War does just about everything right while providing dramatic moments one after another. It transcends even its praise. It's that good, and demands to be played. Online and off.

02. final fantasy xii square enix / playstation 2
It's rare that a 100-hour-long game actually has enough juice to keep players engaged for 100-plus hours, but Final Fantasy XII pulls it off with great aplomb. Role-playing fans are, no doubt, dancing over Square's decision to all but eliminate the random battles and static turn-based whacking in favor of something decidedly more realistic and fluid. Also, the game's story rocks like Jell-O left out during the hurricane.

03. resistance: fall of man sony / playstation 3
A wonderful, balls-out blast-'em-up, Resistance put up a great and depressing tale of mankind on the verge of collapse. This set the stage for a beautiful set of firefights punctuated by some of the greatest weaponry ever created for a first-person shooter. This was the promise of the PlayStation 3 fulfilled on one disc: great gameplay, awesome online action, and eye-bulging visuals.

04. the legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / wii
Twilight Princess showed exactly how well the Wii remote and nunchuk could be blended into gameplay, making video fishing, archery, and swordplay seem comfortable and familiar. It didn't hurt matters any that Twilight Princess was also standard Zelda fare in its intensity, sweeping storyline, and unparalleled sense of adventure.

05. dead rising capcom / xbox 360
Welcome to world's most depressing, zombie-choked mall. If the undead don't get you, the crazed humans will. Players could spend Dead Rising's 72 simulated hours in shopping hell anyway they wanted, and the game's sense of impending doom, as well as its moments of sheer creepiness, made it an instant classic.

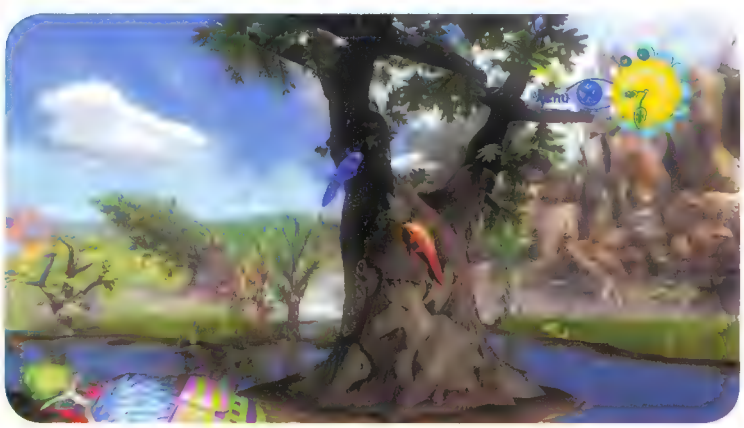
06.viva piñata microsoft / xbox 360
The world may never know exactly how developer Rare made a game about raising virtual party favors, one that tied in to a vapid, children's Saturday-morning cartoon show, that turned out to be an open-ended monster-nurturing epic that would eat days and weeks of players' lives the way Rosie O' Donnell might greedily consume, say, anything vaguely resembling a foodstuff.

07. fight night round 3 electronic arts / xbox 360
Please forgive Fight Night for its unbelievably relentless product placement. If Burger King waddled up to your home with cloth bags emblazoned with $$$ on them, you might drop your drawers and sing "Ave Maria," too. Round 3, when not serving as the cheapest whore in all of video games, proved to be graphically awesome and an amazingly brutal boxing simulator.

08. bully rockstar / playstation 2
Rockstar Games' school days were filled with stuffing nerds into garbage cans, giving them swirlies, and tossing stinkbombs into inappropriate places. Yet its protagonist wasn't the unrepentant scum he'd been made out to be, and Rockstar pulled a fast one on everybody by giving the ultra-deep adventure both a story and a heart.

09. burnout revenge electronic arts / xbox 360
A gorgeous, breathless racer, Revenge was one wicked-fast adrenaline-fueled ride. Aside from its eternally fun and smashmouth automotive combat, the game excelled at providing rewards, whether it was the sight of a magnificent player-inspired pile-up, unlocked tracks or venues, or simply on-screen text heralding some bit driving awesomeness.

10. tom clancy's ghost recon advanced warfighter ubisoft / xbox 360
Advanced Warfighter put its emphasis on strategic thinking, on recognizing the good ground and then seizing it. It was a welcome change from the vast horde of charge-and- blast shooters offering nothing but the opportunity to wrack up a bodycount on the way to some sort of minimal catharsis.



CASEY LOE
senior editor

Twelve years ago, the American game industry revolved around shoddy licensed action games and yearly iterations of EA sports titles, while the Japanese game industry was focused on deep role-playing games and innovative, exploration-driven adventures. The gulf between the two nations was obvious, and a generation of elitist, Japanese-gaming snobs (like me) was born.

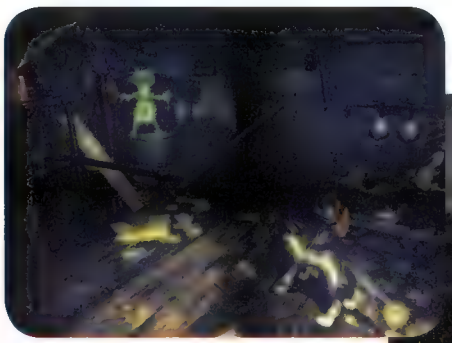
But the tide has turned. Most of the games on my top-10 list bombed in Japan, including Zelda, Castlevania, and Dead Rising. Over there, the year's few success stories are lame DS edutainment titles and Wii Sports. I certainly can't blame Nintendo for reaching out to new customers, but I gnash my teeth at night, envisioning Zelda-producer Eiji Aonuma having to give cuts in the cafeteria line to the brain-training quacks and calisthenics experts that are Nintendo's new golden boys.

But the trends aren't all bad. Just as Japan is losing interest in its own artistic genius, Americans are embracing it in droves. Record-low sales of Final Fantasy XII in Japan are being offset by record-high sales in the US, and the future of series like Zelda and Castlevania is secure—they will continue primarily for western audiences. America's newfound love for Japanese games has even trickled down to smaller developers, who now have little trouble finding western companies like Atlus and NIS to localize their titles.

While North American gamers are embracing the best of Japan, our own top developers are stepping away from their Windows dev-kits and bringing their skills to next-gen consoles. Gears of War and Oblivion are easily among the year's best games, and there aren't many Japanese games I'm looking forward to as much Bioshock and Assassin's Creed.

My friends, the time has come to abandon our J-gaming elitism and join the American mainstream. Let us all upgrade to Xbox Live Gold and start "pwning n00bz" or whatever it is that our countrymen to do. This is no surrender—on the contrary, we have succeeded in elevating American standards to our superior level. The war is won!

"Just as Japan is losing interest in its own artistic genius, Americans are embracing it in droves."



01. the legend of zelda: twilight princess nintendo / gc
We should all be furious that Nintendo conned us into buying a $250 system just to play an inferior version of a GameCube game a few weeks early. But no one is, because Zelda is just that good. Take the whole wallet, Link—I can't say no to you.

02. gears of war microsoft / x360
It's fashionable to claim that graphics are meaningless and that gameplay is all that matters, but Gears of War takes a rusty chainsaw to that lie. Nothing pulls us into games more than stunning environments, and no game proves that more than Gears of War. (As a nice bonus, it plays well too.)

03. castlevania: portrait of ruin konami / ds
While the dual-character thing is Portrait of Ruin's only real innovation, brilliant boss encounters, substantive bonus features and unprecedented length make this the best Castlevania yet. Keep the yearly installments coming!

04. the elder scrolls iv: oblivion bethesda / x360
I thought that the open-ended western RPG had died with Ultima and Baldur's Gate, but it has resurfaced in the form of the first great Xbox 360 game. Oblivion has its flaws, but they're easy to forgive in such an ambitious title.

05. tales of the abyss namco / ps2
It was a great year for PS2 RPGs, and Tales of the Abyss surprised me by climbing to the top of the pack. With an engrossing story, great pacing, and a battle system that never gets old, Tales of the Abyss is this year's most overlooked gem.

06. okami capcom / ps2
I really thought Okami would be my game of the year, but its game mechanics copied Zelda too closely, allowing Twilight Princess to trump it in almost every way. But Okami was without question the artistic triumph of the year, and perhaps of the entire PS2 generation.

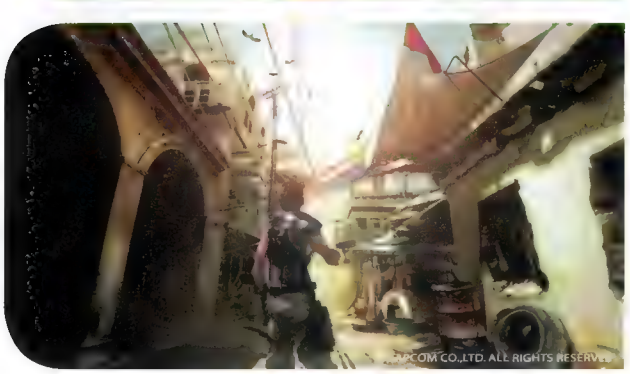
07. dead rising capcom / xbox 360
Dead Rising has so much raw appeal that it keeps pulling me back after its frustrating design decisions push me away. If Capcom can keep what works and fix what doesn't, the Dead Rising franchise will have a very bright future.

08. elite beat agents nintendo / ds
Elite Beat Agents shares this slot its Japanese cousin, Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan! Together these titles have revived my interest in the rhythm game genre and delivered the rare game experience that can be thoroughly enjoyed in 5 and 10 minute stretches.

09. final fantasy xii square-enix / ps2
I didn't like FFXII nearly as much as my colleagues—I was so bored by the simplistic battle system and ridiculous overabundance of monsters that I watched TV on picture-in-picture for most of the game. But I can't deny the appeal of FFXII's open world, adult story, and stunningly detailed graphics.

10. yakuza sega / ps2
Despite massive popularity in Japan and an uncharacteristically fine localization by Sega, Yakuza debuted to horrible sales and mostly middling reviews in the US. Eat it, America—you're wrong, and we're right. Yakuza is a fine game.

2007 MOST ANTICIPATED



DAVE HALVERSON

Three games are missing from this list, one that has yet to be announced (from Atlus) that should change the world, and two that will most likely drop in '08; Fable 2 and Level 5s PS3 project White Knight Story. Look for Eye of Judgment to be this year's alternative juggernaut.

01. heavenly sword / ps3
02. banjo 3 / xbox 360
03. dracula x: rondo of blood / psp
04. super mario galaxy / wii
05. blue dragon / xbox 360
06. golden axe / ps3, xbox 360
07. ff crystal chronicles: crystal bearers / wii
08. eye of judgment / ps3
09. hellboy / xbox 360
10. the darkness / ps3, xbox 360

BRADY FIECHTER

Next year, Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo will all be in full force—launch bs behind them—and we'll have nothing but fleshed out next-generation games to compete across three exciting and substantially unique new platforms. Factor in handheld goodness and 2007 is set to be a great year. As long as Resident Evil 5 comes out.

01. resident evil 5 / ps3, xbox 360
02. bioshock / xbox 360
03. the darkness / ps3, xbox 360
04. fable 2 / xbox 360 /xbox 360
05. mario galaxy / wii
06. assasin's creed / ps3, xbox 360
07. heavenly sword /ps3
08. mass effect / xbox 360
09. blue dragon / xbox 360
10. metal gear solid 4 / ps3

GREG ORLANDO

This is the year we see reworkings of Paper Mario, Star Wars, Halo, Virtua Fighter Burnout, and Fable for the next generation, and while it's entirely possible to lament the dearth of original titles on this list, it may well be that everything old is decidedly new again if you put it on an entirely different, shinier console.

01. fable 2 / xbox 360, ps3
02. resident evil 5 / xbox 360
03. burnout 5 / xbox 360, ps3
04. mass effect / xbox 360
05. halo 3 / xbox 360
06. spore / pc
07. bioshock / xbox 360
08. as-yet-untitled star wars game / next-gen consoles
09. super paper mario / wii
10. virtua fighter 5 / ps3

HEATHER CAMPBELL

I can't wait to play Super Mario Galaxy. I can't wait to play Super Mario Galaxy. I can't wait to play Super Mario Galaxy. I can't wait to play Super Mario Galaxy...

01.super mario galaxy / wii
02.final fantasy: crystal chronicles /wii
03.grand theft auto 4 / ps3, xbox 360
04.halo 3 / xbox 360
05.dawn of mana / ps2
06.final fantasy xii / ds
07.metal gear solid 4 / ps3
08.legend of zelda: phantom hourglass / ds
09.simcity /ds
10.dragon quest ix /ds

CASEY LOE

I wish I could believe that PS3's FFXIII and White Knight Story would come out this year, but I get a distinct aroma of 2008 from both. With them off the list, the Xbox 360 is poised to completely dominate 2007. Come on, PS3 and Wii developers—announce something exciting!

01. bioshock / xbox 360
02. blue dragon / xbox 360
03. assassin's creed / xbox 360, ps3
04. lost odyssey / xbox 360
05. mass effect / xbox 360
06. super mario galaxy / wii
07. halo 3 / xbox 360
08. eternal sonata / xbox 360
09. final fantasy vii: crisis core / psp
10. crackdown / xbox 360

ERIC L PATTERSON

Next-gen really hitting its stride, the best of the forgotten last-gen games coming our way, and the DS paving even more new territory: 2007 looks to be a great year of gaming. Seriously, though... Ms. Pac-Man had better be early 2007. I don't think I can wait much longer.

01. resident evil 5 / xbox 360, ps3
02. world of warcraft: burning crusade
03. final fantasy xiii / ps3
04. persona 3 / ps2
05. halo 3 bungie / xbox 360
06. metal gear solid 4 / ps3
07. wario ware: smooth moves / wii
08. snk vs. capcom card fighters ds / nds
09. ms. pac-man namco / xbox live arcade
10. hotel dusk: room 215 nintendo / nds

Developer	Webzen Korea
Online Mode	Persistent Online
Publisher	Webzen
Available	Q2 2007

words **Mike Griffin**

Hundreds of years from now on Huxley's future Earth, humanity continues to persevere despite war and rampant industrialization. Our cosmic luck, however, would finally run out. Strange nuclearites suddenly flare towards our tiny blue planet, too fast for any defense to be mounted. They slice into the moon as if it were made of cheese, piercing through a haze of sizzling lunar terrain. The radioactive meteors would then strike Earth, eradicating 80% of its population. An aftermath of tainted particles spurs DNA mutation, splitting the surviving humans into genetic factions. Sapiens are comprised of the One, the original "pure" humans, and their mildly-mutated allies, the Syn. Alternatives are anchored by the thick-skinned Alteravers and the Alternix, whose spiked hair and misty-white eyes befit stealthy, introverted demeanors. The war of the Sapiens and Alternatives is thus chronicled in Webzen's big-budget massively multiplayer online first person shooter.

The Huxley online experience involves a five thousand person server, extensive story missions and glorious 100 vs. 100 battle zones that play out like meaty, fast-paced FPS contests. Think Unreal Tournament speed, not Planetside. Fifty RPG character levels can be fueled with XP earned through both quests and player versus player wins. The Enforcer class will tank, the Phantom can cloak and assassinate, and the versatile Avenger can track his enemies. Some items, such as the Mirage Company's sleek Viper rifle, will originate from specific NPC weapon makers. Trikes, APCs, tanks and hover jets can be driven into battle. Cities will have vast markets where players can trade loot and upgrade their combat gear. An incredible art team and monster 3D engine will bring it all to life.

While chasing a rumor regarding a spring beta, we had an opportunity to re-visit Webzen's grand master of Huxley, Producer Ki Jong "KJ" Kang.

> "...a five thousand person server, extensive story missions and glorious 100 vs. 100 battle zones..."

INTERVIEW

Ki Jong "KJ" Kang, Producer, Webzen Korea

play: Plenty of Unreal Engine 3 games coming soon, but not many MMOs in the batch. What's in Huxley that sets it apart from its next-gen kin?

Ki Jong: Huxley flexes the Unreal Engine 3 using all the top industry buzzwords, just with a different style. The art style is very different compared to the glut of space marine or real world militant style that is out there. Huxley's art flavor is a bit more Asian in design, but it is a very western game overall. As a persistent world MMOFPS, the game offers players customization for their characters; two factions, two genders, several facial combinations and tons of armor variations and combinations, which you don't normally see in non-MMO games.

We haven't seen many non-battle zone levels; the campaign questing sort of stuff. What kind of themes are in Huxley's interior maps, and should we expect more complexity in these missions?

Thematically, players will see sewers, processing plants, laboratories, weapons facilities and more. The private missions will maintain the high level of complexity—in terms of AI and graphical fidelity—that is found in the traditional, scripted, single player FPS experience. Enemies in Huxley demonstrate remarkable intelligence.

Will players be clicking hotkeys like in other MMOs? What are the main differences between the PC and Xbox 360 interface?

All of the traditional FPS controls will be there—we are making a game where the primary means of combat is twitch-FPS, so we are not reinventing the wheel here. As far as using the MMO side of the keyboard, Huxley does not have hot bars; it will work very much like having things bound to a key. The keyboard and mouse, as controllers, are optimized for FPS, and the control pad of the Xbox 360 is no match for the strengths of WASD and mouse. So we are designing content and game play to maximize depth and fun for players on both platforms, according to the unique characteristics of each machine, rather than tone down the strengths of the game on each platform or forcing compensation.

> "The art style is very different compared to the glut of space marine or real world militant style that is out there."
>
> Ki Jong "KJ" Kang, Producer, Webzen Korea

Will it be easy for players to locate friends, mission beacons, battle zones...?

In Huxley it will be just as easy to locate characters, your friends, your clan and your enemies as you normally would in an MMO—something not commonly found in shooters.

Have you locked down the rules yet for stuff like group size, looting rights, and distribution of experience and battle points while partied?

Loot rights, group and raid size, level-gap XP/BP distribution is an ongoing process as we continue adding major content and balancing the game.

Today's typical PC gamer is playing WoW, the big shooters, and dipping into RPGs and RTS. What is it about Huxley's core design that will have players hooked within the first few hours of gameplay?

I'm a hardcore MMO player, both PvP and PvE...I'm also a diehard Unreal player. What will hook you—the same way it hooked me—will be the first time you acquire a skill and add it to a piece of gear. Remember the first Blues and Purples that you got in WoW? And then deciding what enchant to put on them to build your set? When was the last time you did that in an FPS? When have you been able to flesh out deep skill trees, allowing you to access different skills and weapons, vehicles or armor in a twitch FPS? With these persistent FPS characters, you will.

How much of Huxley's content will be viable for a casual solo player?

There will be ample for the solo player to do and plenty of gear for them to obtain, but keep in mind this is a MMO, and competitive FPS games have never been about the single-player portions either; it's been Deathmatch, Team DM, CTF, vehicles and leader boards.

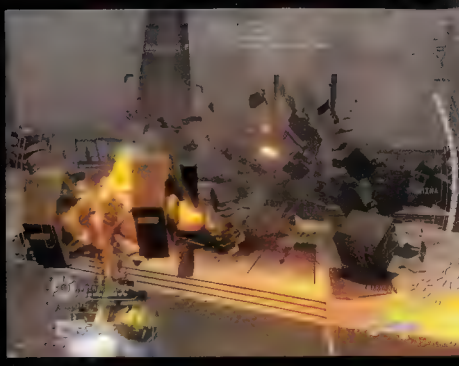
With MMOs, it all comes down to the end game. How much time and effort will be required to experience Huxley's most intricate high level quests?

End game content is always tricky; you can't please everyone, the hardcore want it easy, and the casuals, well, they want it casual. Let's just say no one on the team likes 40-man raids! (laughs).

Following SUN's North American postponement, Huxley is now expected to step up and dominate Webzen's line-up. The company should brace their Huxley servers for deep impact when the public beta rolls around. The allure of persistent characters in a UE 3-powered first person shooter may prove to be an irresistible force. **play**

Developer	Artificial Studios/Immersion Games	Publisher	Artificial Studios
Online/Multi	1-8p DM, CTF, Assault	Available	Spring 2007

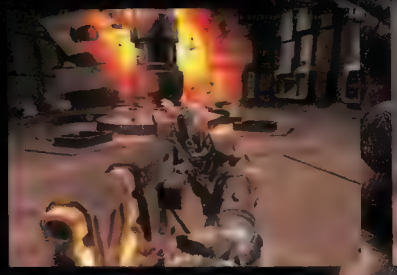
CellFactor Revolution

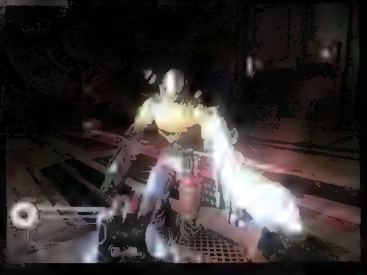


"...has evolved from a technology demo into a serious showcase of physics-enhanced gameplay and telekinetic action."

words **Mike Griffin**

Last year Play had an opportunity to preview Artificial Studios' Monster Madness and we loved their twisted suburban adventure. This Gainesville, Florida-based developer may be a new kid on the block, but its early investments in technology have paid off in a pair of sophisticated titles. While Southpeak Interactive is publishing Monster Madness, Artificial has decided to self-publish its second title, CellFactor: Revolution. This high-powered shooter has grown to evolve from a technology demo into a serious showcase of physics-enhanced gameplay and telekinetic action. In early January we caught up with Jeremy Stieglitz, Artificial Studios' President and lead developer, to talk about the Revolution.





Designing levels with physics destructibility

Julian Castillo, *CellFactor* lead artist, on destructible level design in multiplayer environments:

"We need to make sure that breaking apart the architecture doesn't mess up the gameplay. For example, it's important that knocking down a bridge doesn't make part of the level inaccessible. We need to consider not just the initial structure of the level, but how it might be altered during the course of a game. Consequently, balancing each multiplayer level takes longer than in a game with entirely static architecture."

Interview

Jeremy Stieglitz, President of Artificial Studios

Injected from birth with mind-enhancing drugs, Bishop's psi-mastery is unmatched.

play: Most people know CellFactor as an Ageia PhysX tech demo. How about a quick summary of the current, re-focused CellFactor: Revolution project?

Jeremy: The tech demo, CellFactor: Combat Training, was conceived by early 2006. At the time we wanted to make a fun mini-game that did interesting things with first-person shooter mechanics. When it debuted at the Game Developers Conference, the response to the demo was bigger than we expected. More than 1 million downloads of the trailer were recorded. The combination of psionic powers with gunplay and realistic physics effects intrigued people. This response and our own passion for the concept led us to expand it to a full psychic powered first-person shooter—CellFactor: Revolution, coming this spring. The inspiration for Revolution was born from CF: Combat Training, but the game content has evolved significantly with three unique characters, multiple environments and a dedicated single-player campaign.

The game seems to leans towards multiplayer though. What's to become of the main narrative?

CellFactor: Revolution has a strong single-player component. The player explores the characters' powers in an attempt to complete objectives in futuristic industrial settings. There are three characters: Black Ops, Bishop and Guardian, and players can experience different sides of the war. After a series of cataclysmic events, the planet is now dominated by a superpower dedicated to the advancement of technology, no matter what the human cost. This technology forms the basis of a cybernetic humanoid army whose telekinetic powers are used to maintain order across the planet. A scattered human resistance fights for one last shred of freedom, tapping into psionic abilities in an attempt to conquer this apparently invincible enemy.

Who are the good guys and the bad guys?

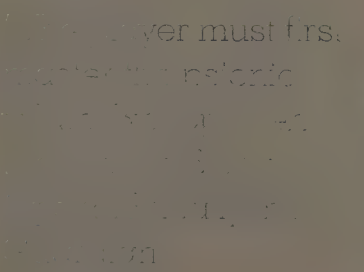
Black Ops is a good guy and part of a special forces unit. The two villains are Bishop, an advanced psionic adept created by the Limbo Corporation, and then Guardian, an earlier creation by Limbo Corporation, which utilizes brute strength. While we skim the surface on the storyline, leaving it open-ended for subsequent adventures, there is an epic battle taking place in CellFactor: Revolution.

Class-based shooters are very popular. Will players be able to take on specific combat roles in Revolution?

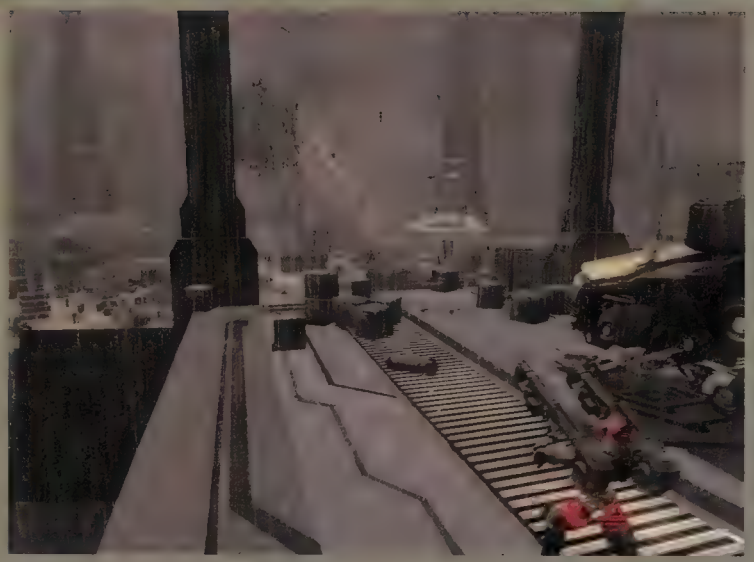
There are three character classes and the choice of who you play determines the gameplay focus. So for example, if you're the type that runs into battle guns blazing, then you'll want to assume the role of Guardian who can wield two weapons. He is heavy assault-oriented in combat. The other characters have specialized abilities, it may take more skill to kill enemies. Bishop can execute using clever physic abilities, and Black Ops is a mix of psionic and gun power.

What can you tell us about CF: Revolution's game modes?

Playing on their own, gamers undertake missions where they hone each character's ability to survive and complete objectives. The player must first master the psionic villain, Bishop, then move on to Black Ops and finally the Guardian, playing through several unique environments. Using a LAN connection, eight players and sixteen AI bots can populate levels for massive multiplayer-combat action. The game modes for multiplayer include: death match, team death match, assault and capture the flag. Assault and CTF are particularly interesting for the Revolution game mechanics.



Jeremy Stieglitz, President of Artificial Studios



How are you taking advantage of the fast local bandwidth in these classic game modes?

In assault, the objective is to bring the bomb to the enemies' base. Once armed, the bomb emits powerful psionic forces. It becomes a dangerous situation, as the center of the vortex pushes and pulls objects when it is armed. In capture the flag, players must use psionic powers to move it. If the player takes the role of Guardian, who does not possess such abilities, he needs to ram it or use different brute tactics to manipulate the flag. The multiplayer modes can also be played with just one human and eight AI characters.

Everyone loves the demo's amazing physics. The team has presumably become even better with PhysX, so what kind of crazy effects should we expect?

Utilization of physics in CellFactor: Revolution, in comparison to other modern action games, is immense in terms of volume and its ability to affect gameplay. Thousands of large moving objects can be manipulated at the same time. All items become weapons or debris, or much more. For example, Bishop can use her mind powers to gather objects around her, creating a Psi Shield, or enveloping and imploding others in a Psi Crunch. Other effects using PhysX are realistic fluid and cloth movement, such as how oil leaks out of barrels…or when flag changing, how the flag reacts when it's been shot. All of these effects are put in not just for show, but also for a purpose. When you see oil leaking from a barrel it may be an indicator of its volatile nature. Cloth can also support an object, such as a wrecking ball, or if the player tears down a banner, they may find it to be useful weaponry. In addition, scorching lava can be psychically harnessed to deflect or smother and kill enemies.

Could these same physics be offloaded to cores on a multi-core CPU, or is the raw horsepower of PhysX needed to drive the intense stuff?

There are some visual effects with rigid bodies, for example, that may be offloaded with a multi-core CPU, but other physics effects are far too intense. The cloth and fluid effects we found are doable in real-time only using PhysX hardware.

You can see it's using that power when you watch the game move. What kind of effort went into other areas of the game's presentation?

A lot went in to the engine of CF:R, including normal mapping, per-pixel lighting, dynamic shadows, very high-resolution textures and rendering a massive amount of objects. We are going for distinct techno-industrial, a clean, but rather dark look and feel for CellFactor: Revolution. The setting is bleak after Earth-shattering events. It represents our vision of what technology might be like when it is trying to be perfected, and things go wrong.

Since you're self-publishing, is CellFactor: Revolution going to be a limited release?

CellFactor: Revolution will be widely available this spring. I can't say for sure just yet, but I'd wager that Ageia is also considering supporting CellFactor on the pro gaming circuit.

Thanks Jeremy, and kudos to Artificial Studios for breaking new ground in real-time game physics. **play**

play PC

2006 EARN EVIEW

With Windows Vista upon us and XNA in high gear, the divide between PC and next-gen consoles is shrinking fast, at least as far as Microsoft is concerned. They're also making it very attractive for Xbox 360 developers to use Live's new services, enabling cross-platform gameplay in titles like Age of Conan—now coming to both PC and Xbox 360. Despite the looming parity effort of Vista and 360, we were reminded in 2006 that the PC shall remain a distinct gaming entity going forward, offering unique brands of gameplay and unparalleled customizability. It was a year of subtly and mastery on this platform, where the very best PC titles showcased brilliant refinements in traditional genres.

BEST FIRST PERSON ACTION – MULTIPLAYER

Battlefield 2142

DICE // EA

Honorable Mentions
- Red Orchestra
- War Rock

Despite its early patching gaffes and in-game adverts, there's no first person action game out there with the multiplayer chops of Battlefield 2142. The futuristic setting allowed DICE to up the technological ante—several hundred feet up, to the giant Titan ships in the sky. The Titan gameplay is a rousing addition to the base conquest formula, stretching the battlefield far and wide and providing some thrilling moments in the guts of the flying behemoth. BF 2142 does not slack in its infantry game either; great street maps and persistent upgrades fuel the addiction.

BEST TACTICAL/RTS

Medieval 2: Total War

Creative Assembly // Sega

Honorable Mentions
- DEFCON
- Warhammer: Mark of Chaos

With Company of Heroes taking the big PC crown, we're going to pay tribute to Medieval 2: Total War in this category. Medieval 2 is much greater than a chain mail re-skinning of Rome: TW. For one, Ken Turner and his team at the Creative Assembly have buffed their powerful engine. The huge field battles have more unique units and animation than ever. The game features a top quality globe-trotting crusade, great campaign map postulating, and the most impressive tactical battles this side of the History Channel.

PC GAME OF THE YEAR

Company of Heroes

Relic // THQ

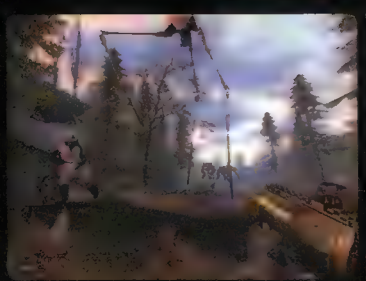
No other PC game of 2006 can touch the superiority of Company of Heroes. In the same way that the Call of Duty series redefined cinematic presentation in wartime first-person shooters, Relic's Company of Heroes has destroyed previous standards in Nazi-era real-time strategy titles. It goes far beyond that achievement, however. CoH demonstrates superb design at every turn, with a near-perfect honing of RTS controls and wonderfully concise and intuitive interface elements. The levels are expertly conceived and factions exhibit skillfully balanced power. A strong engine with awesomely satisfying physics means virtually every object can be smashed into flailing bits. Relic has also imbued its gameplay with grit and constant motion, as reactive AI squads use every possible asset for cover, flanked by outstanding detail and animation. The final delivery of all this action to the battlefield results in a spectacular movie-like presentation and a clinic of level design and balance that any gamer will appreciate. Along with its memorable cinematics and terrific multiplayer game, Company of Heroes is clearly one of the most polished and fully-realized PC games to appear in years.

BEST FIRST PERSON ACTION – CAMPAIGN

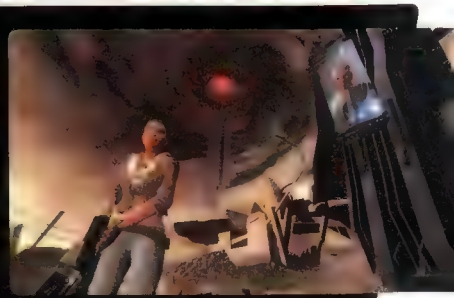
Half-Life 2: Ep. 1

Valve // EA

Honorable Mentions
- Dark Messiah of Might and Magic
- Condemned



How can a six-hour episode be the best a genre has to offer? Valve makes it so. Half-Life 2: Episode 1 is essentially every bit as good as HL 2. The story and environments are as compelling as ever, and the execution of level design, action and pacing as Alyx and Gordon flee a crumbling City 17 is nothing short of masterful. Should Valve's episodic entries sustain this high-quality leading up to Half-Life 3, the series will remain at the forefront of FPS campaign design.



BEST MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER

Guild Wars: Nightfall

ArenaNet // NCsoft

Honorable Mentions
- Phantasy Star Universe
- Guild Wars: Factions

We are recognizing stand alone 2006 releases and it was a slow, delay-filled year for the massively multiplayer online genre. Not that any of the 7.5 million WoW players cared. Of the handful of new full releases, ArenaNet's Guild Wars: Nightfall proved to be the year's finest MMO offering, delivering another engaging and atmospheric campaign experience for newcomers and GW vets alike.

BEST ROLE-PLAYING

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Bethesda // 2K

Honorable Mentions
- Neverwinter Nights 2
- Gothic 3

The king of PC role-playing games in 2006 was Oblivion. While the 360 version is the more economical option (considering system requirements), Bethesda's monster hit is a major achievement in open world RPG design regardless of platform. Oblivion is also one of those landmark technical titles that raised the bar for a generation of games to follow.

BEST ACTION RPG

Titan Quest

Iron Lore // THQ

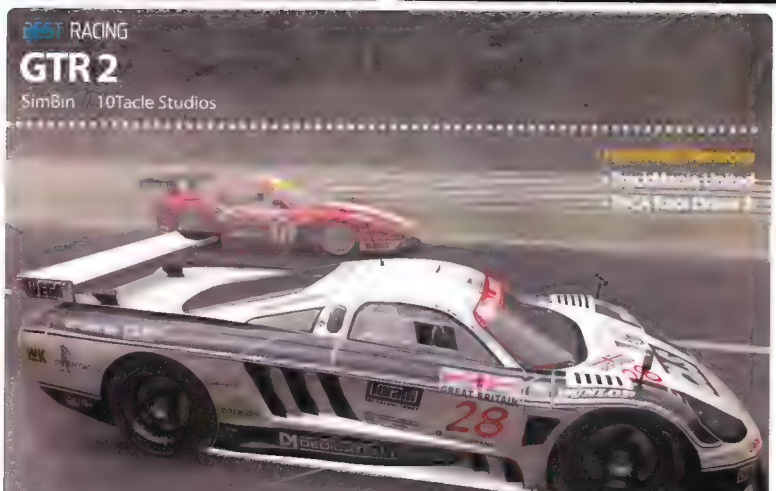
Honorable Mentions
- Marvel: Ultimate Alliance
- Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

Zeus only knows why Age of Empires' lead designer decided to go off and make a Diablo clone, but thank the many gods that he did because Titan Quest is a great old school action RPG set in a lavishly detailed ancient world.

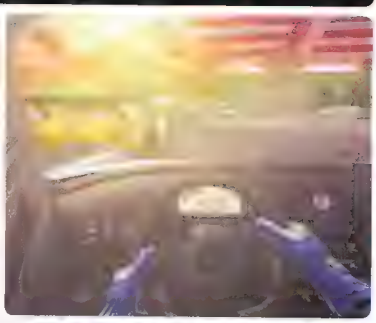
BEST RACING

GTR 2

SimBin // 10Tacle Studios



GTR 2's stunningly realistic vehicle handling dynamics are apparent from the first moment you take one of the 140 [illegible] sports cars out on the track. [illegible] world FIA circuits are modeled in painstaking detail. GTR 2 has the most customizable vehicle, track and weather options in any racing game, and unlike its intimidating predecessor, it's gentle on new drivers.



Medieval 2: Total War

Creative Assembly // Sega

1701 A.D.

Sunflowers // Aspyr

The Ship

Outerlight // Steam

BEST ADVENTURE

Sam & Max: Episode 1 Culture Shock

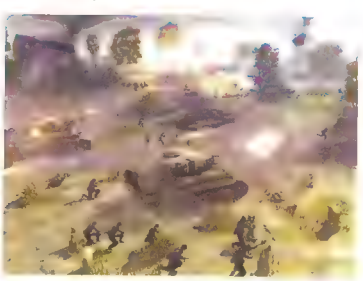
Telltale Games

RoboBlitz

Naked Sky // self-published

Company of Heroes

Relic // THQ



Warhammer 40,000 Dark Crusade

Relic // THQ

Neverwinter Nights 2

Obsidian // Atari

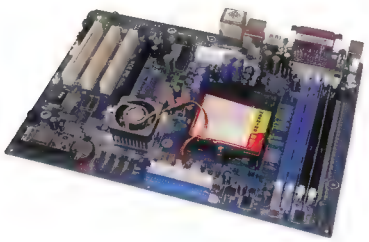
Gothic 3

Piranha Bytes // Aspyr

ask alienware

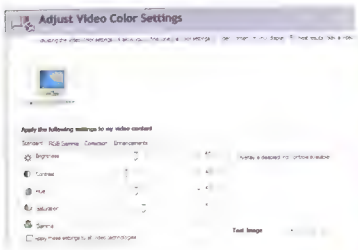
no. 009 // february 2007

Q. When should a user update their motherboard bios? In the case of my mobo, I noticed the last bios update included better support for GeForce 7900 cards. I use a 7800, but wouldn't I want the new bios anyway? Mark, Franklin VA.

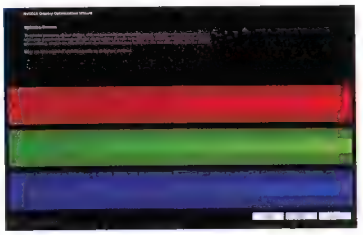


Alienware: Customers should read the release notes of BIOS fixes carefully. In the release notes, you will find what has changed from one BIOS fix to another. If the fixes are relevant to an issue you are having or give functionality that you feel is valuable, then you should update the bios.

Q. To adjust color on my monitor, I have a choice between the buttons on the monitor, the color software that came with the monitor, and the color calibration wizard in my video card's control panel. What's the best solution of the three? James, Spring TX.



Alienware: Although you can use all three techniques for color calibrating, we recommend using the driver settings in the video card's control panel. This will save you from changing many settings if you decide to upgrade your monitor in the future.



Q. Having a tough time finding the right resolution for my HDTV when outputting from the computer's video card with DVI. My video card seems to prefer an overblown 720p or a1080i mode where everything looks pretty fuzzy. How do I get my video card to match the TV's real native resolution? Jeremy, Miami FL.

Alienware: Many HDTVs have drivers you can load that will allow you to adjust the resolution for the best picture. If you do not have that option, you must add the display's custom resolution utilizing the video card's driver settings instead.

Q. I was happy to see that NVIDIA's new 8800 series permits HDR and anti-aliasing at the same time. I'm a little skeptical about some of the other GF 8800 features, like the low cost anti-aliasing. How much stronger is the 8800 compared to the high end 7-series GeForce cards? Chris, Lowell AR.

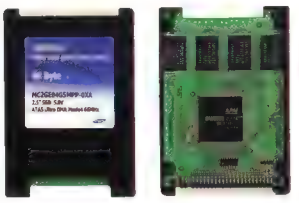
Alienware: NVIDIA's new 8800 series has truly added a bevy of useful features. And the 8800 series can often deliver more than 100% higher performance than previous GeForce 7s, depending on the benchmark.

Q. What's the minimum processor speed/type needed for HD video encoding? Is dual core totally essential? Michael, Calgary AB.

Alienware: Dual-core is not essential for HD video encoding, but it is highly recommended, most importantly if you are planning on multitasking and encoding the video at the same time. And with a dual core processor, you will definitely experience performance increases when editing the video.

"...a new feature in Vista that gives manufacturers the capability of using high-speed flash drives as a disk cache."

Q. Will high-capacity flash drives replace hard drives? I read somewhere that a PC's operating system could sit on a fast piece of flash. Laptops may be the first place they try it. What is this technology? Leo, Boston MA.



Alienware: It is always difficult to forecast trends in the PC market. ReadyBoost is a new feature in Vista that gives manufacturers the capability of using high-speed flash drives as a disk cache to increase overall system performance. In the future, expect manufacturers to take advantage of this very, very useful feature.

THE NEXT GREAT ACTION RPG FROM THE CREATORS OF THE "Ys" SERIES.

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-- RP[illegible]

Silver Award

— [illegible]ecsu Magazine

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IN STORES FEBRUARY 13, 2007

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RATING PENDING
RP
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PlayStation Portable

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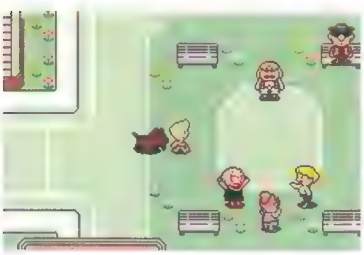
PLAY JAPAN 2006 AWARDS

words Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

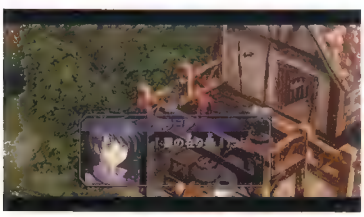
2006 was perhaps the strangest year the Japanese video game industry has ever faced. PlayStation 2 sales were way down (which is perhaps to be expected), DS became the Best Thing To Happen To The Industry Ever, Xbox 360 failed to break 500,000 systems sold, the PlayStation 3 launched with a shockingly paltry 88,000 units, and a "*new* gen, not next gen" machine with specs roughly equivalent to the systems of five years ago looks set to conquer Japanese living rooms. With that said, there was plenty of gaming flavor to be had this year. Without further ado, Play Japan presents its modest Awards for 2006.

01. mother 3 | nintendo | gameboy advance



Mother 3, sequel to the cult SNES hit EarthBound, didn't need a massive budget (or even 21st-century visuals) to be arguably the best traditional RPG of 2006. It's a shame Nintendo didn't see fit to Englishize Shigesato Itoi's heartfelt tearjerker, even though it has a built-in audience.

02. legend of heroes: sora no kiseki fc | falcom | psp



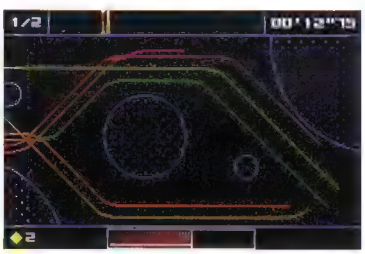
Don't let the Legend of Heroes monicker fool you; previous PSP entries in the series have been shoddy ports of decade-old games by companies other than Falcom. Sora no Kiseki is a thoroughly modern, yet delightfully old-school Japanese RPG experience with perhaps the best story of 2006.

03. senko no ronde rev. x | g.rev | xbox 360

While the full Japanese retail price may be a

little steep for this rock-solid versus shooter (yeah, versus shooter -- regular shooters are to Senko no Ronde as Final Fight is to Street Fighter II), it was ripe for some entrepreneurial American publisher to snap up and release for $29. Of course, nothing that awesome ever happens in the real world.

04. bit generations series | nintendo | gameboy advance



Some people claim there's nothing new under the sun in video gaming. These people have not played Nintendo's bit Generations. Its concept was to go back to the early roots of gaming -- think Atari 2600 -- and discover new, pure game forms in a similar mold. Nintendo succeeded brilliantly, and only Japan ever got to find out about it.

05. [illegible] | nintendo | gameboy advance

Nintendo's 2006 track record for releasing its quirkier Japanese games in the West is pretty awful, and Rhythm Tengoku is just more evidence. Combining the surreal irreverence of a Wario Ware with the addictive beat gameplay of a Space Channel 5, Rhythm Tengoku may very well be the last great GameBoy Advance game.

06. [illegible] | playstation 2

Let's hear it for the fans! After Capcom all but abandoned the genre they created with 2-D fighting games, it fell to fighting aficionados to make their own. Officially the first dojin, or fan-made, game to be released as a licensed console product, Melty Blood also happens to be a great game in its own right.

07. samurai spirits: tenkaichi kenkyakuden | snk playmore | playstation 2

The 2-D fighting train keeps on steamin' with SNKP's loving farewell to the Samurai series (at least in hand-drawn form). With every character who ever put an appearance in the lengthy series playable, it remains a mystery why SNKP decided Samurai V was more worthy than this product for US release.

08. siren 2 | sony | playstation 2

Survival horror is a genre that was largely absent in the West last year, and it's unfortunate that hole wasn't filled by the uniquely Japanese, singularly terrifying Siren 2. Other games may have scary *monsters*, but the Siren series is about scary *people*...and is there anything more truly frightening?

09. dragon quest & final fantasy in [illegible] | square enix | psp

The first, and, so far only, DQ/FF crossover was a resounding success on PSP...even if it had some pretty dreadful load times. Melding much-loved characters of yore with Yuji Horii's superb Monopoly-esque board game experience, Itadaki Street provided quality gaming in an uncommon genre.

10. brave story: shinsetsu yuki monogatari | sony | psp

Former Capcom development head Yoshiki Okamoto's Game Republic delivered the second-best PSP RPG this year in the form of Brave Story, a great game based on a very, very average theatrical anime. PS2-quality in all respects (except its brief length), Brave Story showed what was possible on the PSP should budget permit.

Infamy Awards of 2006

01. square enix for dragon quest ix

Was taking Japan's #1 video game franchise of all time off home consoles, and onto Nintendo DS a sound business decision? Yeah, probably. Square Enix's stock shot up and it's probable the game will end up eclipsing DQVIII's 3.6 million units sold. What it means for fans of Japanese console games is more frightening. Never mind not getting a next-generation DQ. Never mind the game dropping command-based battles and becoming a multiplayer online RPG. Think about what it means for home gaming in Japan: Might it spur a mass exodus from consoles? Did Square Enix just kill next-gen before it even got started?

02. sony for ruining a system launch

Can you think of even one good thing to say about Sony's handling of the PlayStation 3 launch? Didn't think so. How do you come off 100 million PS2s sold worldwide and tank so hard, even though you sport a slew of time-tested ultra-franchises, as well as the most powerful gaming hardware ever conceived? Just ask Sony.

03. tenbuyers for generally being a nuisance

It's said that over *50%* of all PlayStation 3s sold at launch in Japan, and a great many Wiis, were purchased by foreign "tenbuyers" (a portmanteau of Japanese "tenbai" [resale], and English "buyer"). Tenbuyers made the two system launches rather unpleasant, preventing many a gamer from obtaining their hardware of choice for personal gain: Grey-market resale in Asia and on the Internet.

04. bandai namco for culdcept saga

It went largely unreported in the Western press, but Bandai Namco released what was possibly the most bug-laden consumer video game in history last year: Culdcept Saga for Xbox 360. More than 40 easily-reproducible major bugs, many of them fatal, were reported, and the game was virtually unplayable online. The belated patch only introduced *more* bugs, and as of press time a second patch has not yet been issued.

05. cero for germany-style censorship

Japanese video game censorship is now far more extreme than in the West. Titles like

Resident Evil 4 and Dead Rising are significantly less gory than their English counterparts, and games rated "Z" (such as Dead Rising) by CERO, Japan's equivalent to the ESRB, cannot be displayed in stores. Ten years ago Resident Evils were getting censored in *America*, not the other way around. What happened to Japan? *America* happened: All this fuss is because of Grand Theft Auto. Thanks, Rockstar.

TOP 30

Least Necessary Japan-Only Games of 2006

01. full-body singing exercise by professor jin akiyama: unlock your "thinking power"! / arc / nintendo ds
02. train your right brain with your eyes: ds speed reading assistant by professor akihiro kawamura of the new japan speed reading research society / millennium / nintendo ds
03. easy easy arrangement: ds home accounting / bandai namco / nintendo ds
04. light brain monster: inspirational child-rearing my angel / bandai namco / nintendo ds
05. proper japanese: ds e-examination with the society for testing japanese literary skill / imagineer / nintendo ds
06. kaiware nakamoto's happy kitchen: you choose the secret ingredient! / hnb / nintendo ds
07. dr. brain beauty salon: iq supplement ds / spike / nintendo ds
08. hideo kageyama's iq coaches ds: thinking power and learning power directed by hideo kageyama / ie institute / nintendo ds
09. shichida-style right brain discipline it's right brain ds: instant dash! memory / interchannel / nintendo ds
10. kankayashi-style brainpower development method: right brain kids ds: directed by shigeru kageyama / ie institute / nintendo ds
11. shichida-style right brain discipline it's right brain ds: instant dash! memory / interchannel / nintendo ds
12. shichida-style right brain discipline it's right brain ds: instant dash! memory / interchannel / nintendo ds
13. learn it to speak brain check / brain cell rejuvenation quiz / taito / nintendo ds
14. shoichi kanzawa's baby communication ds / takara tomy / nintendo ds
15. adult coloring book to ease the heart and mind ds / arsain / nintendo ds
16. palmtop easy learning series: perfect pitch training ds / success / nintendo ds
17. it's fun like to ask genius: adult common sense test how ds directed by japan society for testing common sense / nintendo / nintendo ds
18. stock trading trainer: kabutore! / hamumu / nintendo ds
19. fumie wakakuwayashi's ds study lesson / bandai namco / nintendo ds
20. simple ds series vol. 11: let's go once again! the adult primary school / d3 publisher / nintendo ds
21. my trainer ds: communicating skills for reliable adults / takara tomy / nintendo ds
22. stop being embarrassed! business etiquette you can use tomorrow ds / gakken / nintendo ds
23. my happy etiquette book / taito / nintendo ds
24. talking! ds speaking navigator / nintendo / nintendo ds
25. 1000 health support recipes: the complete hall of fame / nintendo / nintendo ds
26. window wa education committee ds / bandai namco / nintendo ds
27. roblox / sega sammy / playstation 3
28. make your square head round ds: the knack of arithmetic / ie institute / nintendo ds
29. mitsuo aida's brush calligraphy to penetrate the heart ds / artoon / nintendo ds
30. ds kageyama method cyber hyperthymic mark & mind 100 calculations / shogakukan / nintendo ds

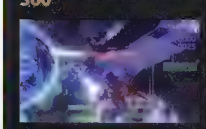
TOP 5

Games of 2006 We Fear Will Remain Japan-Only

01. fresh-picked tinkle's rose-tinted rupee land / nintendo / nintendo ds

As of press time, Tinkle -- you probably know him as Tingle -- has been confirmed to be coming to Europe. But not America! Must such a fantastic game be regulated to Japan-only obscurity simply because a few folks out there aren't too fond of gaming's only single, 35-year-old, green leotard-wearing superstar?

02. project sylpheed / square enix / xbox 360



Leaving Game Arts and Square Enix's Project Sylpheed in Japan is almost unthinkable, but it has yet to be announced for American release. The sheer volume of speech may be prohibatory, but we beg Square Enix -- or another enterprising publisher -- to bless us with this true next-generation shooting experience.

03. yakuza 2 / sega / playstation 2

The original Yakuza was a fantastic game, but it didn't sell too well in the West. It is for this reason we fear the equally-great sequel will be passed by for American release, especially given its pricey voice talent. Just release it with subtitles? Nay: Sony has a policy of denying releases for games that lack English voice.

04. oneechanbara vortex / d3 publisher / xbox 360

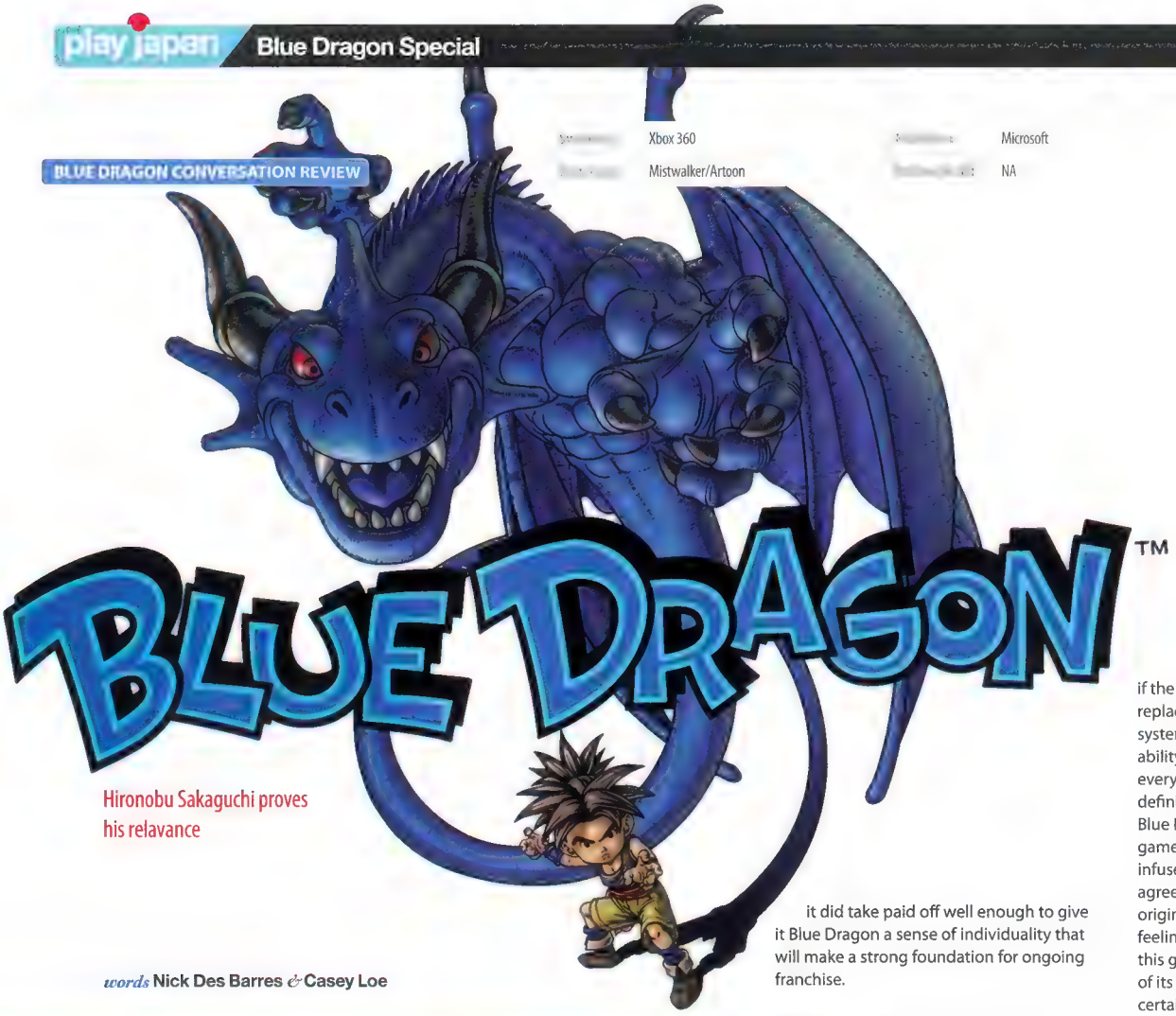
Another seeming no-brainer for the US, yet D3 has announced only companion 360 game Earth Defense Force for Western release. Is the blood porn just too extreme for Occidentals? Would it get an AO rating? We don't know, but as one of the most gonzo games ever made it'd be a shame not to see an American edition.

05. tales of destiny / bandai namco / playstation 2

Damn you, America! Namco bled tears of pain to bring you a wonderful localization of Tales of the Abyss, and you spurned it. Now we will all be punished when they inevitably refuse to translate this beautifully reworked, remodeled, revoiced and rearranged version of Tales of Destiny.

BLUE DRAGON CONVERSATION REVIEW

	Xbox 360		Microsoft		Now (Japan)
	Mistwalker/Artoon		NA		NA



Hironobu Sakaguchi proves his relavance

words **Nick Des Barres & Casey Loe**

Nick: Wouldn't you agree Blue Dragon is probably the most expensive non-Square Enix -- indeed, non Final Fantasy -- Japanese RPG ever made?

Casey: Absolutely. This must have been one of the most expensive games of all time in any genre, especially considering the money required to bring this level of talent on board. But unlike Tetsuya Mizuguchi, who I imagine spent his lavish Ninety-Nine Nights budget on Faberge eggs and diamond-encrusted bongs, Mr. Sakaguchi seems to have spent most of his Blue Dragon budget on making a spectacularly good game.

Nick: This is clearly a situation where money bought quality. Anyone reading this almost certainly knows who's involved, but why don't you remind me?

Casey: We have Hironobu Sakaguchi, (producer of Final Fantasy I-IX), Nobuo Uematsu (composer of Final Fantasy I-IX), Akira Toriyama (character designer of Dragon Quest and Chrono Trigger) and Artoon, a massive development house that notably includes much of the Panzer Dragoon Saga team. Combine all these credits and you end up with a team that was involved in half of the top ten greatest RPG's of all time (as selected in the last issue of Play).

Nick: Don't forget a large chunk of Sonic Team as part of Artoon, as well. That's an interesting combination...three of the four most important people in mainstream Japanese console RPG history (only Yuji Horii is missing), and a team that made one of the most compelling altera-RPGs ever. It's a shame they didn't decide to take more risks with Blue Dragon's gameplay experience.

Casey: I was actually a little surprised at how innovative Blue Dragon was, though I suppose that was mostly because I was expecting a straight-up rip-off of Dragon Quest. Still, while Blue Dragon's core mechanics and structure are very conventional, it has a lot of little new ideas that work very, very well, particularly relating to skills that are used outside of battle to avoid, attract, or flat-out kill enemies without going into a standard battle. Maybe it should have taken more risks, but the ones it did take paid off well enough to give it Blue Dragon a sense of individuality that will make a strong foundation for ongoing franchise.

Nick: I, like you, am in love with the game, but I'm just not feeling the innovation. The setting and concept are definitely original, but the gameplay is essentially a stripped-down Final Fantasy V, and the Toriyama design necessarily means the aesthetic is going to be very Dragon Quest. I think the concept was to make the ultimate Everyman's Japanese RPG pastiche, and in that sense Blue Dragon is a resounding success. I will admit, however, that the battle system is a nice compromise between 1986-style random encounters and seamless world games.

Casey: I will concede that Blue Dragon straight-up rips off of FFV's Job System, but if the actual Final Fantasy team is going to replace the greatest character-development system of all time with a bunch of stupid ability boards, then Hironobu Sakaguchi has every right to take it back. And while there is definitely a Toriyama aesthetic to the graphics, Blue Dragon looks nothing like any other game ever made, even the similarly Toriyama-infused Dragon Quest VIII. Surely you'll agree that this game's art direction is wildly original? As for the rest... It's possible that the feeling of innovation is an illusion borne of this game looking so much better than any of its predecessors. I know in my head that certain elements, like the world map, are a step backwards from games like Final Fantasy XII, but it all looks so pretty... It can't be wrong. Nothing this pretty can be wrong!

Nick: That's really the key, isn't it? You get confronted with anything this pretty, and discussions about deep character-building systems go right out the window. Blue Dragon may be a game that would have been possible to make on the SNES, but the only place I've seen visuals this singularly stunning before is in CG animation by Pixar.

Casey: It is amazing how much impact a game can have when it's the first real next-generation game of its genre. Each new area

"You get confronted with anything this pretty, and discussions about deep character-building systems go right out the window."

compelling story?

Casey: Well, for all the talk about Mr. Sakaguchi, he should really be sharing the spotlight with whoever this game's main programmer is. This is one of the most impressive engines I have ever seen, and for once I don't mean "compared to anything except Gears of War." There is no pop-in on anything, ever, no hiccups in the framerate, no apparent limit to the amount of large, stunningly detailed characters that can appear in one battle (with very short load times, by the way), and that whole real-time blurring effect that smoothly transforms real 3D geography into what looks like a slightly hazy oil-painting—brilliant. But I'm not going to let your little dig at the story go uncommented on! Maybe Blue Dragon doesn't need to tell a compelling story, but it does anyway. The story is very conventional, yes, but it's extremely well done. There are a few nice twists and the pacing is absolutely perfect. It never felt too rushed or too slow.

Nick: Definitely. What makes the engine so impressive is its totally unexpected originality. When was the last time a game totally bowled you over with a radically new look? Jet Set Radio? Keep in mind I don't just mean a *great-looking* game, I mean a game that establishes a new visual paradigm. Blue Dragon simulates a camera technique called tilt-shift photography that narrows the depth-of-field of the image, transforming the 3D tableaus into what looks like miniatures, or claymation. With the one-two punch of this selective blurring technique and dynamic real-time shadows cast by literally every object on-screen, the game resembles nothing as much as a contemporary CG animated motion picture.

Casey: Um... yeah, that's totally what I meant to say.

Nick: I'm going to have to disagree with you on the story front, though. It's beyond hackneyed. It's so hackneyed, it's *genial*. And this is not a bad thing! Blue Dragon is to classic J-RPGs of the past -- I want to say early 90s -- as Star Wars and Indiana Jones are to adventure serials of the 30s. It's a massive-budget re-imagining of a bygone form of entertainment.

Casey: Hmmmm... So your counter-argument is that Blue Dragon's story sucks as much as Star Wars and Indiana Jones? I think I can live with that. So, speaking of things from the 90s, let's talk Nobuo Uematsu. Has it really taken until 2007 for Nobiyo to compose his first CD soundtrack?

Nick: My counter-argument is that BD tells a story that's satisfyingly predictable. They say predictability pleases humans; we fear the unknown, after all. It's like a great pop song built on three-chrord structure. You've may have never heard it before, but you have. And yes, speaking of great pop songs, that brings us back to Nobuo Uematsu. It's been, what, the better part of a decade since his last full soundtrack? Not to mention his first that isn't chip-generated. For the first time, the original RPG master of melody has live instruments, string sections, singers. Is this soundtrack everything you hoped for from Nobiyo's grand return?

Casey: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. I don't know that it's consistently his best work, but many of the individual tracks are among the best he has ever done. There are a few tracks that bug

of the game has the same basic little save-the-town scenarios that we've been seeing since the 8-bit days, but now that they can be presented with beautiful hi-def graphics, a dramatic, CD-quality Nobuo Uematsu song and well-directed cinematics, they pull me right in. If it were a SNES game, I probably would be bitching about how clichéd it is.

Nick: You have just spoken God's truth. I don't think anyone can deny this game is the equal to Final Fantasy VII and Final Fantasy X in terms of being the first true barometer of the next-generation RPG. What we're seeing in this game is typical of Square at their best: Everything is seamless. Every area is finished at the same level of detail and there are zero gaps in the experience where the sensory standard falters. In many ways, I feel Blue Dragon is the most visually impressive next-generation game yet. When you have a visual experience this rich, do you even need to tell a

Toriyama in gorgeous 3D. The game's engine is truly special.

> "Blue Dragon is about 95% close to the perfect J-RPG experience. But it does have that one tiny problem..."

the crap out of me, but many, many more that are instant classics. (Sadly, as is his M.O., the annoying ones are played 1,000 times each and the best ones are saved for a single memorable moment.)

Nick: Spoken like a true connoisseur. It should be noted we both own several hundred video game soundtracks and take the genre fairly seriously. I would definitely agree Blue Dragon has the best *individual* compositions of his career, but there's "only" about fifty of them, so Final Fantasy VI or IX would probably still come out on top. With that said, however, if you have any love for the man, this soundtrack will please you greatly. Nearly ten years without an Uematsu soundtrack reminds you why he's so brilliant: Unlike contemporaries like Koichi Sugiyama and Hitoshi Sakimoto, the man is wildly versatile. He can throw down grand orchestral pieces, techno-pop, and hard rock with equal aplomb.

Casey: So what are your thoughts on the boss music sung by Deep Purple's Ian Gillan? And what do you think the odds are that particular track will remain in the US version?

Nick: Hah! Great question. Any longtime Nobiyo fan knows the man's infatuation with Deep Purple, and it's nice he got to work with his idol. Microsoft's money coffers are clearly good for many things. The song itself isn't bad, though I fear you will beg to differ. I think the failure here is using it so often -- it's simply too distinctive to be the main boss theme. I have little doubt it will remain in the US version, however. Its lyrics are by übertranslator Alexander O. Smith, after all. What worries me more are the three Japanese vocal tracks, and especially the out-of-this-world brilliant last boss theme that contains the resounding Engrish chorus "DESTROY ALL LIFE! DESTROY ALL DEAD!".

Casey: At first I thought that Ian Gillan song was horrible. Then, for a while, it was so bad that it was good. But after thirty-some bosses I did indeed come to hate it with a fiery passion. But it's a fair representation of how experimental Nobuo Uematsu is being here, and that same sense of experimentation has produced several astonishing tracks. And to think we have only months (?) to wait for his next soundtrack, Lost Odyssey! In any case... Blue Dragon is gorgeous, technically groundbreaking, has great music and an enjoyable if predictable story. Sounds like a near-perfect game without a single major flaw. Dot... dot... dot... (Are you seeing the setup here?)

Nick: Yeah, Blue Dragon is about 95% close to

the perfect J-RPG experience. But it does have that one tiny problem. What is that problem, Casey Loe?

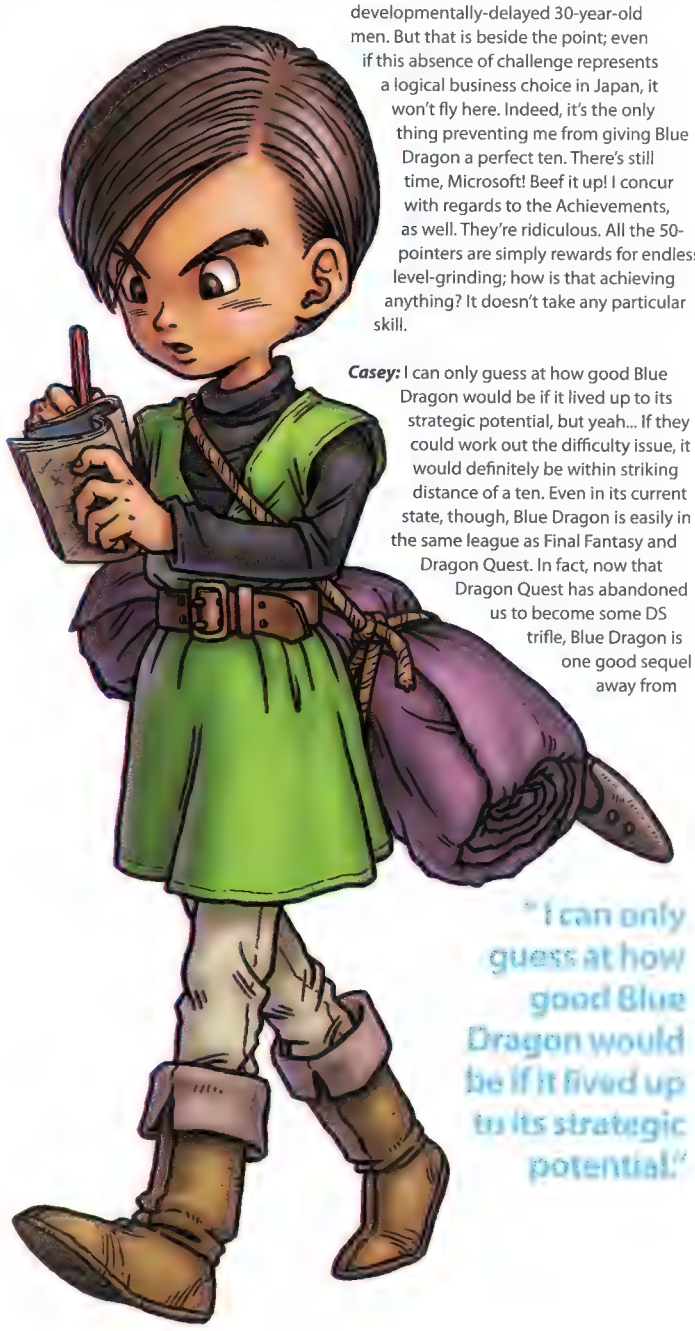
Casey: I'm so glad you asked! This game is so ridiculously easy that it is just pathetic. There's a bit of challenge at the beginning, and some legitimately tough optional stuff at the end, but unless you're some moron who threw 100% of his effort into a developing a near-worthless class like "Power" for every single one of your characters, you will face virtually zero threat of death for maybe thirty straight hours. And the huge tragedy is that the Job System allows for a stunning level of strategic depth, but none of it matters AT ALL. So, you live in Japan. Tell me—do your countrymen totally suck at games, or do they just really hate losing?

Nick: Thank you for getting that out there. I love Blue Dragon so much, I almost couldn't bear to utter the words. Yeah, this game takes the trend of easy mainstream J-RPGs and runs with it. Blue Dragon is about 95% close to the perfect J-RPG experience. But it does have that one tiny problem.This is the major flaw with the game, and one I hope is addressed in the American version. The infrastructure is here for an exceptionally strategic game: The system is basically Final Fantasy V (though stripped of its useless jobs), a game still held up as the best pure gameplay experience there is in Japanese RPG history. The legitimately difficult optional bosses only make this more clear. It's like Sakaguchi was planning for an old-school *gameplay* experience in addition to the story and aesthetic, but got railroaded by market research. As you say, most Japanese these days complain that games are just *too hard.*

Casey: Maybe the developers thought that their game would be purchased by a generation of fresh-faced lads touching a video game controller for the very first time. But of course, it was purchased by no one except for developmentally-delayed 30-year old men like us. I hope Microsoft realizes that in America games like this are enjoyed primarily by hardcore fans who would be livid if they played Blue Dragon in this state. And to add insult to injury, the achievements in Blue Dragon are terrible for the exact opposite reason. You can spend 50-60 hours beating this game and most of its optional quests and come away with maybe 50 achievement points. To get the rest you have to do perfectly at a series of lame button-mashing minigames (which you can't redo unless you reset and reload) and spend hours pointlessly leveling up characters and classes long after it serves any useful purpose.

Nick: My feeling is that this game was toned down sometime prior to its release. All the *tools* are there, all sorts of interesting skill combinations and accessories. There's just never any reason to use them. Also, fresh-faced lads are often the best gamers. Think about the mad RPG challenges you were beating down at age 14, you know what I mean? People complaining about difficult games here in Japan usually *are* developmentally-delayed 30-year-old men. But that is beside the point; even if this absence of challenge represents a logical business choice in Japan, it won't fly here. Indeed, it's the only thing preventing me from giving Blue Dragon a perfect ten. There's still time, Microsoft! Beef it up! I concur with regards to the Achievements, as well. They're ridiculous. All the 50-pointers are simply rewards for endless level-grinding; how is that achieving anything? It doesn't take any particular skill.

Casey: I can only guess at how good Blue Dragon would be if it lived up to its strategic potential, but yeah... If they could work out the difficulty issue, it would definitely be within striking distance of a ten. Even in its current state, though, Blue Dragon is easily in the same league as Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest. In fact, now that Dragon Quest has abandoned us to become some DS trifle, Blue Dragon is one good sequel away from



"I can only guess at how good Blue Dragon would be if it lived up to its strategic potential."

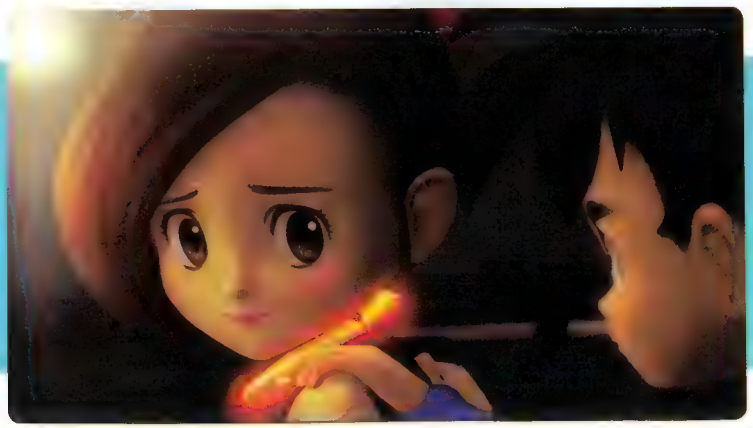
stealing its spot. (In my heart, at least. Outside of my heart, Dragon Quest will continue to outsell it by huge margins.)

Nick: The DQ shock was so profound, I'm compelled to agree. All the groundwork is tenderly layed here for a massive RPG franchise. It's strange to praise something as crass as a soulless megacorporation funneling money into a project with the goal of making Lowest Common Denominator RPG, but it's a testament to the talent of the people involved that Blue Dragon turned out as great as it did. I only hope it sells enough in the west to warrant Sakaguchi and team being allowed to continue to tread this path. This is Microsoft's first important Japanese franchise, and I don't want to see them screw it up. If the market allows giant-budget RPGs in the Final Fantasy VII mold to continue to be made (and there is some doubt as to that), they're going to look and feel a lot like this game...and for that reason alone, Blue Dragon is an absolute must-play.

Blue Dragon

9.0

Blue Dragon gives you plenty of reasons to backtrack to old locations later in the game, but who wants to return to an area full of tedious encounters with weakling enemies? This is where field skills like Baribarrier come into play. They're learned like any other skill, but instead of giving you a combat ability, they help you avoid combat entirely. As long as you've defeated an enemy once, Baribarrier allows you to kill it for a few MP by ramming into it, transforming a turn-based RPG into something closer to Monkey Ball. Since you still earn SP (which level-up your classes) this is a valuable way to earn experience while you hunt for previously inaccessible passages and treasure chests.



System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Square-Enix	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	H.A.N.D.	Online/Multi	Wi-fi card battles	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

Chocobo and the Magical Picturebook

Square-Enix's bold challenge to Yoshi's picturebook-motif monopoly

words Dai Kohama

After scoring a critical hit (and commercial flop) with last year's Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime, Square-Enix is making a second attempt at transforming a franchise mascot into a DS star. Chocobo and the Magical Picturebook may not be the breakthrough title that Rocket Slime was, but it employs the same strategy of intertwining different genres to create a game that feels much more fresh and unpredictable than a typical licensed product.

A simple RPG provides the framing device, in which you control a Chocobo who sets out to stop a magical tome that has run amok. To stop it, you'll need to enter a series of ensorcelled picturebooks, each of which contains a mini-game with several selectable difficulty levels. Whenever you beat a new level you'll free a captured friend, unlock an epilogue that triggers an event in the outside world, or earn a Pop-Up Duel card. The Pop-Up Duel card game is Chocobo's meta-game, used primarily for boss fights and wi-fi multiplayer. It plays like a mix of Magic: The Gathering and Final Fantasy IX's Tetra Masters, combining random elements with a healthy dose of deck-building strategy. It isn't quite as deep or original as Rocket Slime's tank duels, but the promise of new cards offers plenty of incentive to explore the game's world, challenge all of the optional mini-games, and master every picturebook.

While the RPG and card game parts are reliably entertaining, the mini-games are all over the map. About half of them are slight modifications of the tired batch that were packed in with New Super Mario Bros., and the original ones are split evenly between legitimately fun and thoroughly stupid. The difficulty varies wildly, with some mini-games allowing you to climb the difficulty ladder without a single loss, while others have optional achievements that requires hours of practice and incredible amounts of luck to achieve. At least they *look* consistently good—while the RPG parts make good use of Square's lovely Final Fantasy III engine, the mini-games have a pop-up book motif that is no less attractive. They sound good too, if you don't mind the fact that every music track in the game is lifted straight from some other Final Fantasy or Chocobo's Mystery Dungeon game.

With its weird mishmash of genres, art styles and difficulty levels, Chocobo and the Magical Picturebook is sort of a mess. But it's the *good* kind of mess, born of a passionate development team that was determined to pack a ton of ideas into a DS cartridge. I hope that Rocket Slime's miserable sales won't keep this endearing title from seeing a US release.

"...the RPG parts make good use of Square's lovely Final Fantasy III engine..."

Chocobo and the Magical Picturebook

SCORE 7.5

\+ Fun mix of genres

\- Mini-games are hit-or-miss

Story time today; organic, free-range Chocobo nuggets tomorrow.

IMPORT REVIEW

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEI	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Evolution Studios	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

MotorStorm

...: E. Storm

"For the first time a racer's topography takes center stage over everything else..."

You've never seen anything like this...

In case you hadn't heard, Motor Storm's graphics come at you like your PS3 is having a perpetual orgasm… That may sound crude, but I see no other way to describe the majesty of what's going on in this game. The launch stuff; pft, ha! This is why you risked your life and went into debt: For a game console.

Forget modes for a second and bask in the fact that for the first time a racer's topography takes center stage over everything else, and in this game "everything else" makes other racing games look like you're back at the miniature golf castle playing Sprint.

It's all about the combination of real-time terrain deformation (I thought we'd never see it) and courses that offer unprecedented freedom. There aren't one or two lines through Motor Storm's array of tracks, or even three or four…there are untold ways to navigate each section as they funnel in and out of singular grooves, where all manner of vehicles bump and grind for position. Crashes render Burnout style slo-mo pieces but otherwise these races are determined by pure course prowess depending on the vehicle you are in or on. Otherwise it's a fight against the physics of each track's mud, sand, and undulations as you combine strategic boosting with navigation as you pick your way through the pack. How fun is it? Are you into racing? If so, throw fun out the window; this is living.

The game takes place amidst a giant rave/rally with the ultimate goal being becoming the reigning champion by mastering each of the game's events; various takes on 8 stages via buggy, bike, ATV, rally car, racing truck, mud-plugger or big-rig. Rather than choose your vehicle, each challenge becomes about making the best use of the assigned ride, which in turn lets the developers do their thing, creating courses that require you to master each for any given vehicle. The line you used to conquer "The Tenderizer" on a bike for instance isn't going to do you any good in a rig and so on.

What else can I say? The music is great, the unlockable movies plain scary (the PS3 is such a beast) and the replayability off the charts. The US version will have online to boot. Not that I care but for those of you who do stay tuned. We'll look deep under its hood in the March issue.

MotorStorm

SCORE 9.5

+ Good dev, 'cept, [illegible] graphics and gameplay, to die for

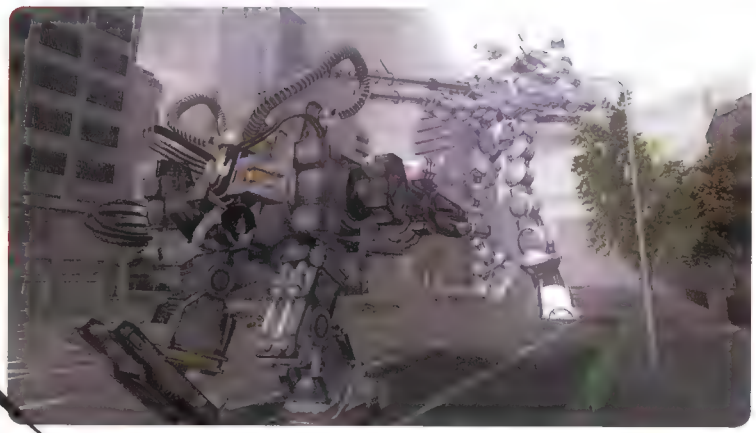
− Beginner tips, find the real-time physics hard to fathom. Stick a thief!

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	D3	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Sandlot	Online/Multi	Split-screen only	ESRB Rating	NA

GAME REVIEW

Earth Defense Force 3

Twice the quality at triple the price



words **Dai Kohama**

D3 began commissioning original IP's when they ran out of board games to convert into $20 PS2 titles, and against all odds, a few of them turned out to be legitimately good. Now the hit E.D.F. series has made its way to the Xbox 360, but it's left the whole "budget price" thing behind. The next-gen graphics soothe the hit to the wallet, but can a prettied up version of a $20 game possibly justify a $60 price tag?

E.D.F.'s budget heritage shows through right off the bat. The game's intro is three still pictures with text, the game's menus are crudely designed, and the hero lacks animations for such common actions as landing from a fall or clamoring over debris. There is no online play and the split-screen co-op is hindered by the fact that every player character and NPC squad member looks identical, so you can't even tell who your friend *is*. (Although I do appreciate that they split the screen horizontally, the way widescreen games *should* be split. Do you hear me, Epic?) Worst of all, someone forget to include a reload button, so the only way to refill your guns between battles is to empty them into a wall.

But the more you play E.D.F., the more it will grow on you. The game aims for a classic War of the Worlds/Them/Godzilla vibe that no game has attempted to capture in years, and it does an excellent job of it. The alien ships and robots are distinctive, exquisitely detailed and beautifully designed. But by far the best part of E.D.F. is its many "holy *f***!*" moments. Developer Sandlot doesn't believe in subtlety, and is perfectly willing to send the game's framerate crashing into the single digits to wow you with a massive enemy horde or unfathomably huge boss. The erratic framerate is annoying, but these jaw-dropping moments are always worth it.

"While E.D.F. has scores of lazy flaws, it pulls off a lot of impressive technical feats as well..."

While E.D.F. has scores of lazy flaws, it pulls off a lot of impressive technical feats as well. The environments are massive, offering huge chunks of Tokyo that one can explore freely without running into invisible walls or other barriers. You can turn any building into rubble with an explosive weapon, and the game gives you plenty of good reasons to witness this delightful effect. There are some serious issues with the default control scheme and camera, but they can all be fixed with a little time spent in the options menu, resulting in a game with fairly tight controls.

E.D.F. is also a surprisingly lengthy game—it offers over 50 missions at five difficulty levels a piece, and with new enemies, weapons, vehicles and environments being introduced regularly, there's a lot less repetition than you'd expect. E.D.F. may not have the polish of a full-priced game, but it certainly does have the content. Does that make it worth $60? Hopefully, that's a conundrum only the Japanese will need to struggle with—there's still a chance that D3 will settle on a $40 price point for the US release. If they do, I'd recommend it without reservation.

Earth Defense Force 3

(US title: Earth Defense Force 2017)

7.5

GAME REVIEW

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEJ	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Level-5	Online/Multi	None	ESRB Rating	NA

Jeanne d'Arc

words **Casey Loe**

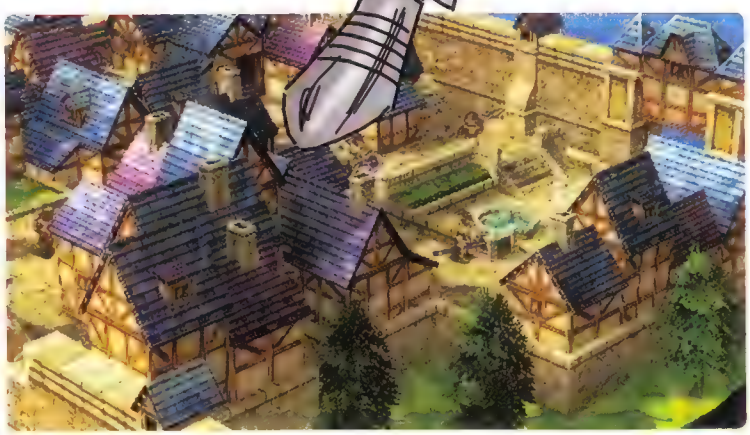
Level-5's Jeanne d'Arc tackles the true story of France's greatest hero, a teenage girl who found an armband that could transform her into a costumed knight with magical powers, and used it to team up with dogmen, lionmen and the frog-thing from Rogue Galaxy in order to defeat the orc army sent by England's demon-possessed Henry VI. Wow! Who knew European history had so much in common with shojo anime? Yes, Level-5's take on the Joan of Arc story is ridiculous, but at least they're telling it with nearly 30 well-animated cut scenes that put the UMD format to excellent use. It's refreshing to see a PSP game with this kind of budget, but it's a pity that Level-5 decided to focus their resources and imagination on Jeanne d'Arc's storyline instead of its utterly derivative game design.

Jeanne d'Arc is full of quirky little systems, but most of them are only slight variations on the mechanics employed in nearly every isometric strategy game ever made. In terms of original ideas, the ability to temporarily transform certain characters into super-characters is cool, and the way each character's magic points start at zero and grow throughout the battle is interesting, as are a handful of the class-specific abilities. But Jeanne d'Arc rarely strays from genre standards, and in the few places where it does, the results are disappointing. Character development consists of simply finding abilities on the battlefield (or making them through a skill-combination system) and equipping them between fights, an unsatisfying and time-consuming process that robs the supporting cast of any semblance of personality. Another twist is a per-battle turn limit designed to prevent you from turtling up and relying excessively on healing spells and ranged attacks. While this is fine in theory, it ends up limiting your strategic options by goading you into simple rush-and-attack strategies.

In practice, Jeanne d'Arc feels very similar to the original Final Fantasy Tactics. You'll visit similar battlefields, fight similar enemies, and use similar tactics to win. That isn't such a bad thing, since Final Fantasy Tactics had a winning formula that still holds up nicely today. But while series like Disgaea have succeeded in putting new spins on the genre, Jeanne d'Arc is content simply to be a blander, less compelling version of a decade-old game. That might have been enough to recommend it a few months ago, but now that an actual Final Fantasy Tactics remake has been announced for the PSP, only insatiable strategy fans should consider importing this pleasant but uninspired imitation.

Jeanne d'Arc

6.5



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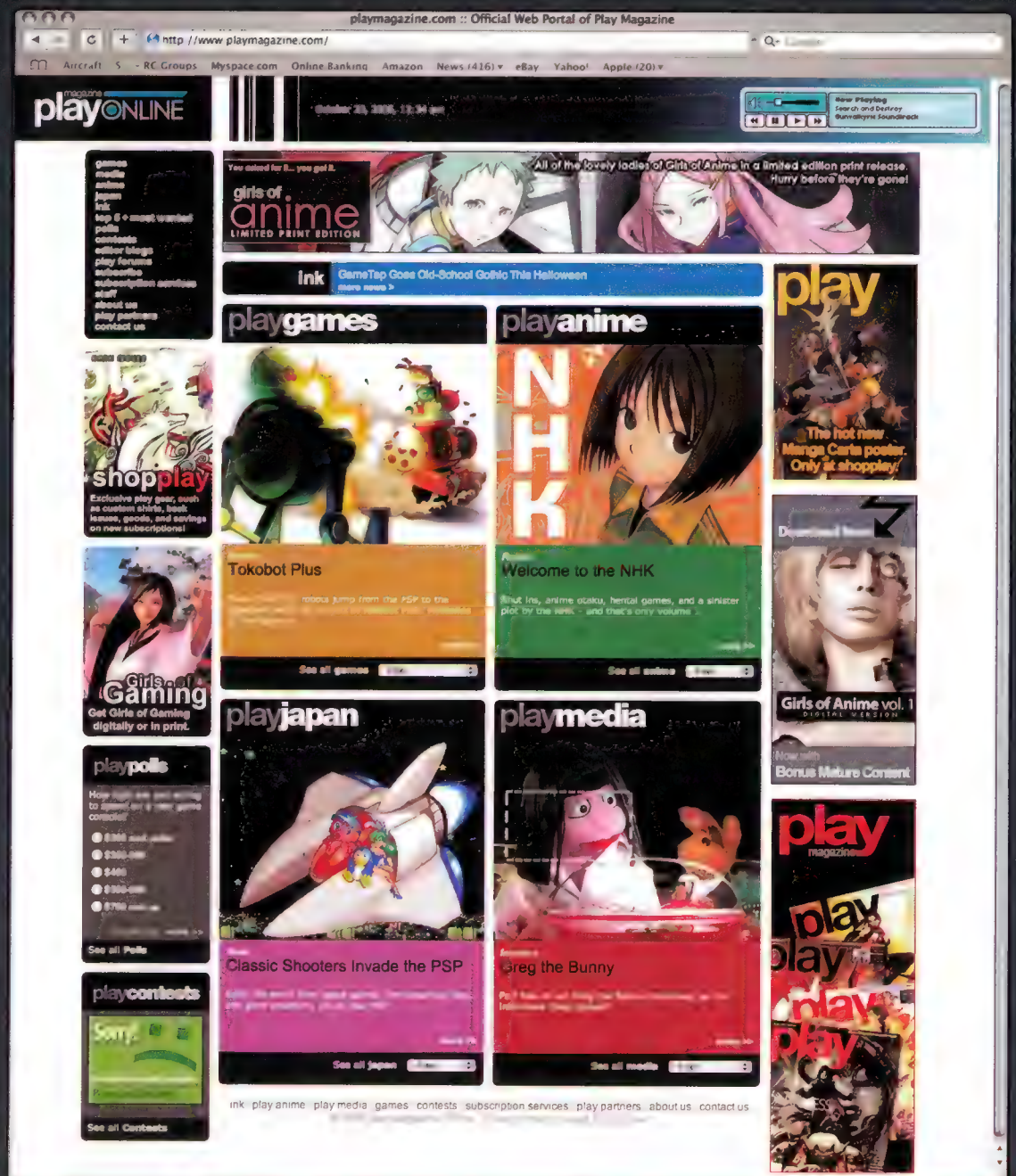

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Released by	Bandai Visual USA	Running Time	180 minutes
Rating	13+	Available	Feb. 20

Gunbuster

The ultimate edition finally busts out

words Eric L. Patterson

"Gunbuster is a show that belongs on the DVD shelf of every household in America"

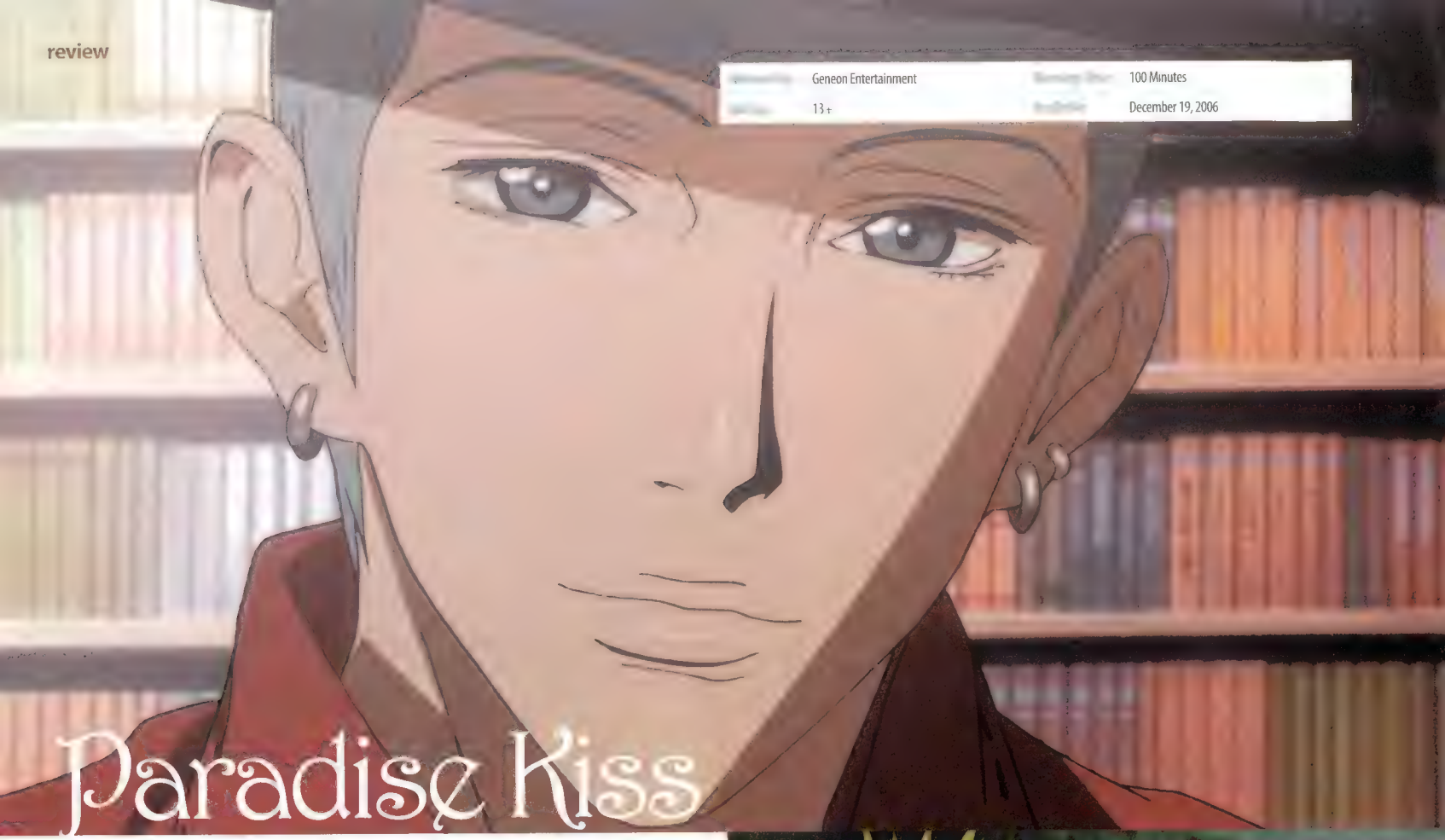
Writing this text is the end of a journey of sorts for me. Long before they were known as the company behind Evangelion, Gainax blessed the world with Gunbuster, their other epic tale of giant robots and alien invaders. For over sixteen years I've loved this show dearly, but in all that time, no true, definitive release of Gunbuster has ever hit our shores... until now.

Thanks to Bandai Visual USA, not only will this be the first time that Gunbuster has ever been released on DVD here in the States, but the package we're getting does absolute justice to such a timeless classic. All six episodes of the original OVA series have been re-mastered in HD 24P format, and the script used for the English subtitle track comes from a new translation done under the careful supervision of the original producers.

For me, that would be enough right there, but Bandai Visual USA is also packing in 30 minutes of bonus video, plus a 24-page color booklet, all lovingly tucked inside a gorgeous deluxe art box that comes straight from Japan. To sweeten the deal even further, for a limited time, a special Gunbuster trailer manga card from anime legend Haruhiko Mikimoto can be had after purchasing the DVD set and sending in a reply form.

Gunbuster is a show that belongs on the DVD shelf of every household in America, and thanks Bandai Visual USA, that dream can now come true.

www.BuyAnimeMusic.com



	Geneon Entertainment		100 Minutes
	13+		December 19, 2006

Paradise Kiss

Fashion faux pas

Sometimes I wish I'd gone to art school. Or fashion design school. Or thrown away my parents' money with a degree in historical costumes. Life at an Art Institute seems so eclectic; the personalities that shuffle through the halls at LACMA, drawing sketches of the temporary exhibit on fashion through the ages come off so intense, dramatic, and ... cool.

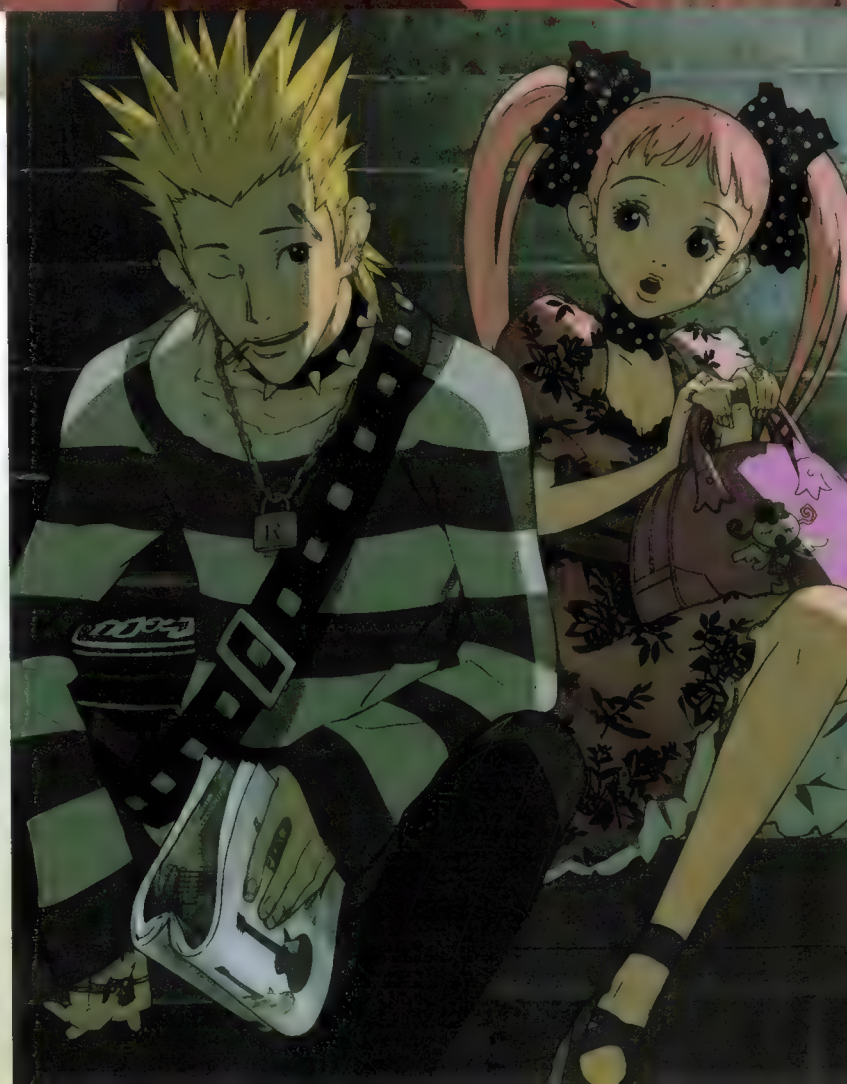
Sure, there were art students at campus, and a few of them were my friends. I had a costume designer in my life, and I knew a slew of performance artists. But being immersed in the world of fashion is totally alien to me. That's part of why Paradise Kiss is so awesome.

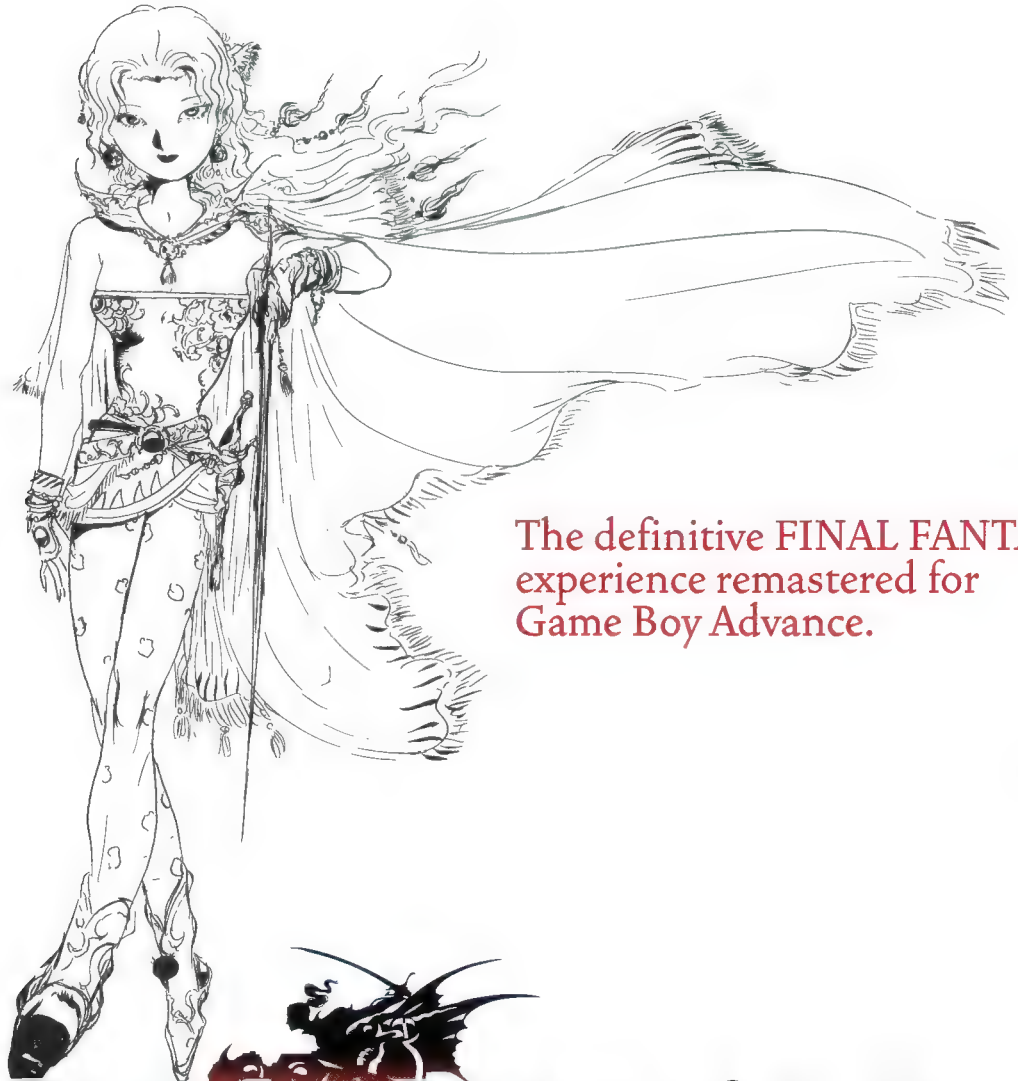
Taking a very slice-of-life approach to the world of high-school fashion majors, Paradise Kiss (or PaRaKiss, as its referred to by fans) is the story of Yukari Hayasaka. She's an overwhelmed, cram-school kid with few aspirations. She's also got a model's body. When she's approached by Arashi Nagase, she can't believe that anyone would want her to pose for a fashion show. In fact, she refuses this little call to adventure until meeting George, the founder of an upcoming studio called, "Paradise Kiss."

By the end of the first DVD, you know that Yukari has some major chemistry with enigmatic George, and the show is shaping up to be a patient, at-times-uncomfortably-real exploration of fashion and romance. That's saying a lot for a show that features a kid driving convertible sports car.

It should be mentioned that this is the first show where the opening theme has caused me to drive down to Little Tokyo and buy an artist's CD. The song is "Lonely in Gorgeous," and it's delivered by Tommy February6. Combining 80's synth-pop sensibilities with melancholy, phonetic English, the artist was too much to resist. I couldn't decode my feelings after hearing it -- was I embarrassed, charmed, or giddy? Tommy's the haute couture of anime opening themes; absurd, impractical, and intoxicating.

score 8.5





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Released by	ADV Films	Running Time	100minutes
Rating	16+	Available	January 16, 2007

Coyote Ragtime Show

A howling good time

words Dave Halverson

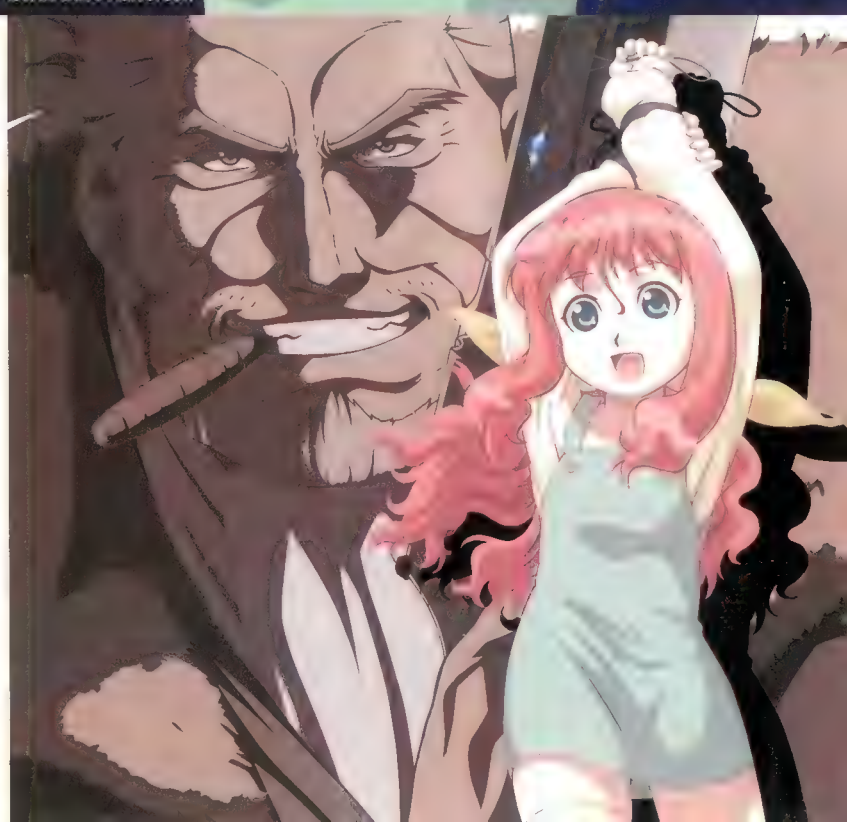
Coyote Ragtime Show is series anime on a grand scale; the kind of show you're more than willing to grant a stay of execution for the occasional lull, knowing that the next shining moment--the kind that reminds us why we love animation so much in the first place—is just around the corner. Like so many before it, Ragtime most definitely picks from the A-list shelf…a little Bebop here, a pinch of Outlaw Star and Heat Guy J there, maybe even a dash of Lupin--but only to accessorize its uniquely extravagant game of cat-and-mouse.

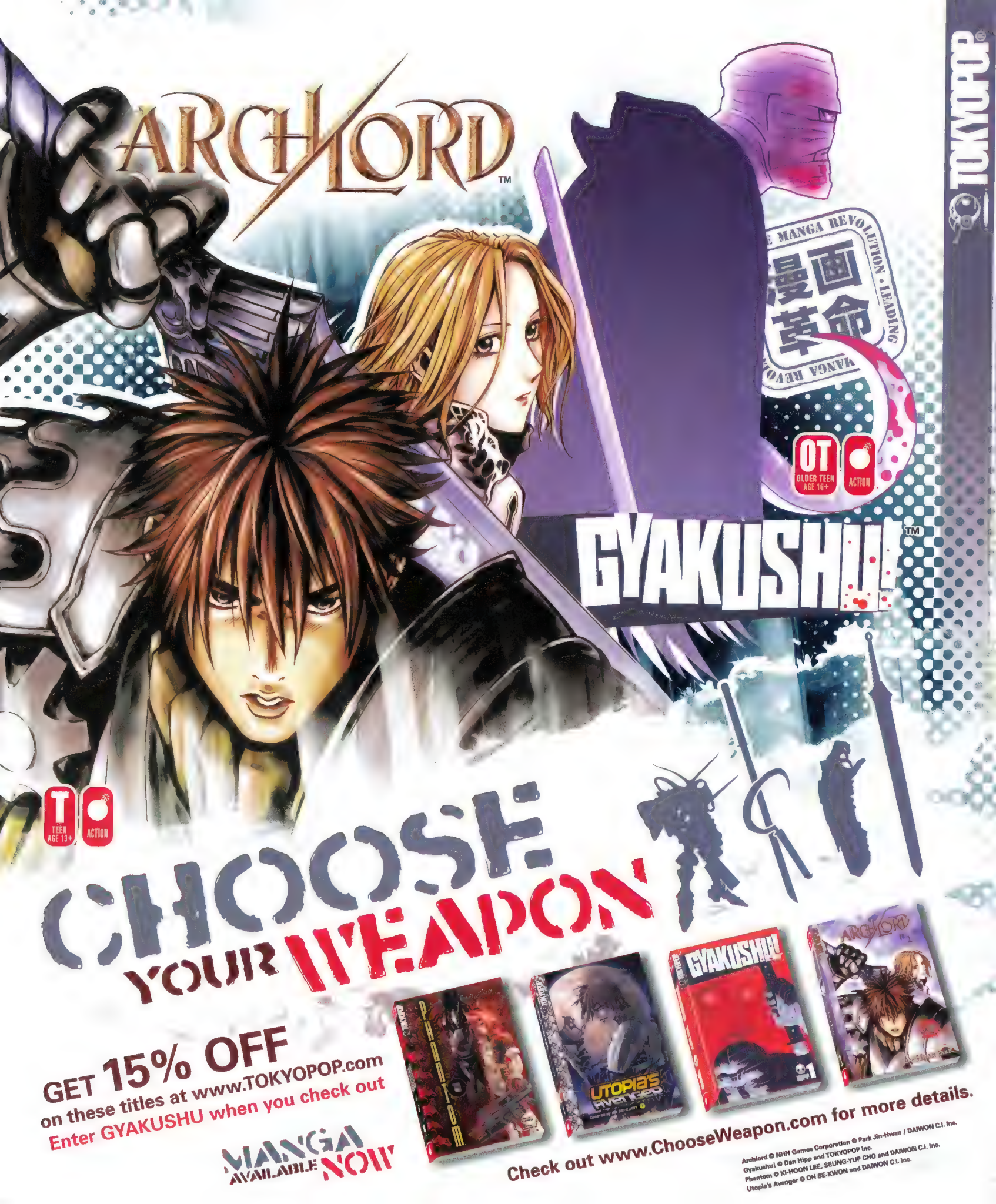
At the heart of this atypically violent space opera we find two criminal factions: Madame Marciano and her 12 gothic Lolita killing machines, and Mister, a rugged, ultra-dexterous space-pirate and his too-cool-for-school associates. Hot on their tales and trail is Federation Detective Angelica Burns--a stunning beauty with breasts to die for and the appetite of a small village.

Marciano is after the fussy young Franca, or more specifically the ten billion space dollar treasure she's inherited-- located somewhere on the planet Graceland in a secret vault. Bound to protect her is Mister; hence the hero-cum-bad-guy middle ground. Mister's a bad mama-jama, but of the three he's definitely the most honorable. Wrap it all up in some of the most gorgeous animation you've ever seen (up until episode 4, at least) with ultra-spiffy production values that merge digital animation and CG with the best of 'em and you've got one seriously cool slice-o'-grown-up animation. With any luck Volume 2 will continue along the lines of the series first two episdoes; among the most stunning 40-odd minutes of anime I've seen in some time.

> "...breasts to die for and the appetite of a small village"

SCORE 8.5





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	Geneon Entertainment	Running Time	100 Minutes
	13+	Available	December 19, 2006

Fate / stay night

フェイト/ステイナイト

Crossover gold

words **Bill Gray**

Ten years ago, a mysterious series of explosions rocked Fuyuki City and incinerated a much of it, leaving only one survivor, a young boy named Shirou Emiya. Rescued by a man who claims to be a sorcerer, Shirou eventually takes his adopted father's lifelong dream as his own—to become a true champion of justice, able to protect all human life. Little did he know that he would eventually be caught up in a ruthless tournament known as the Holy Grail Wars, where killing is a way of life and the prize is having a wish come true.

Thus begins *Fate / stay night*, an extremely well-done adaptation of the Japanese video game of the same name. While not transcending its origins, *Fate* manages to maintain a breathless pace that leaves you wanting more. The fulcrum of the show rests on young Shirou—it's through his eyes that we begin to watch the drama of the Holy Grail Wars unfold. Mercifully enough, Shirou is conflicted, idealistic, and downright interesting, as he tries to live out the principles of justice that have been deeply ingrained in him by his adopted father.

Coincidentally enough, Shirou is one of the seven magi (sorcerers and sorceresses) chosen to compete in the deadly Wars. The wars themselves are not fought by the magi alone—instead, each magus summons a special servant to do the fighting for them. These servants are the actual spirits of famous warriors from the past, summoned every sixty years when a new round of Grail Wars begins. Though lacking much in the way of magical energy or training, Shirou manages to summon one of the most powerful servants, Saber.

Here is where the video game origins become evident, as each servant comes from a specific class, with strengths and weaknesses that require careful management of their skills and abilities. I mean, doesn't that sound like something straight out of *Final Fantasy Tactics* or *Shining Force*? It's too bad the actual game on which the anime is based on has yet to be released stateside.

Much of the fun of the show stems from this video game feel, actually. I liken it to playing a typical anime-based RPG, only instead of endless leveling up in order to watch a three-minute cut scene, you can just sit back and watch these well-produced cut scenes back-to-back-to-back. True, some of the scenes seem a bit stiff in places, and the subplot with Shirou's friend Sakura and guardian Taiga feels tacked on, at least in the first volume. But that shouldn't stop you from choosing this *Fate*, unless of course you like endless level grinding—in which case, you should probably get back to playing the original *Phantasy Star*.

"I liken it to playing a typical anime-based RPG..."

Fate / stay night score 8.5

Air Gear

Jet Set but not Radio

Publisher	Del Rey	Genre	Action	Volume	1 & 2
Story	Oh! Great!	Art	Oh! Great!	Rating	16+

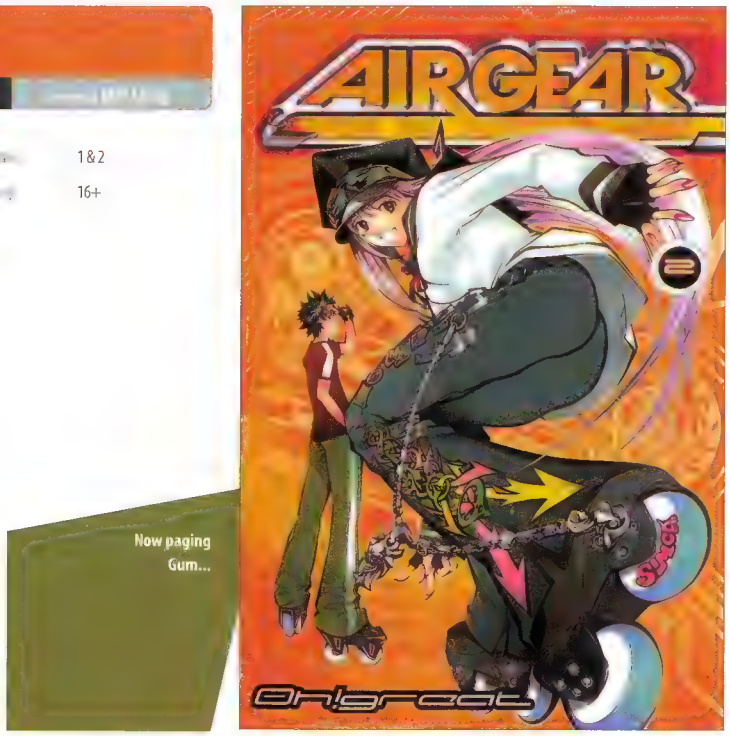
I wonder what Tony Hawk could do with a pair of Air Trecks. Featured prominently in Oh! Great's latest manga, *Air Gear*, these inline skates, through a combination of high-powered motors and an air-cushion system, endow their users with the ability to skate at terrifying speeds—and to defy gravity with seemingly endless flight. Of course, the ability to fly doesn't come cheaply, as Itsuki Minami knows all too well.

Grounded, Itsuki dreams of someday skipping along the tops of the concrete jungle in a pair of his own Air Trecks. In the meantime, he leads a gang of junior high boys known as the Eastside Guns and lives with the Noyamano sisters, four orphaned girls who suffer his presence. Or rather, he suffers in their presence, as all of the girls except one take every opportunity to beat Itsuki up—in a loving way.

Itsuki's idyllic existence as the king of the Eastside shatters when thugs known as the Skull Saders beat Itsuki to within an inch of his life. It is this action which forces the girls to reveal that they know more about Air Treck than Itsuki imagined, and put him on a path to enter, and eventually dominate, the underground world of Air Treck.

Combining gang warfare, fan service, dazzling aerial race sequences, and a vulnerable, likable leading man in Itsuki, *Air Gear* is a distinctly Japanese take on Western skater culture. Now I wish I could get a pair of my own Air Trecks . . .

Read it if... You like skating, urban intrigue, girls, or Jet Set Radio.



Rocket is here!

Available now everywhere magazines are sold!

Blank

Not drawing one

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Action/Comedy	Volume	1
Story	Pop Mhan	Art	Pop Mhan	Rating	16+

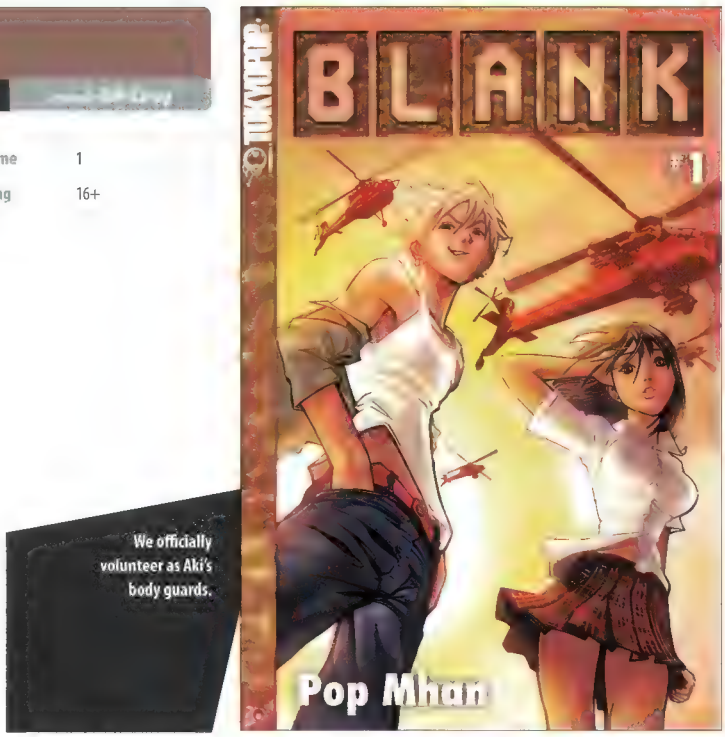
Reading a western take on Japanese manga usually leaves me unsettled, disturbed, and disappointed, like watching a movie featuring a Belushi, only to realize it's Jim and not John. Though those feelings linger in Pop Mhan's action/comedy *Blank*, it has the makings of a decent story as well.

Borrowing liberally from *Full Metal Panic* (not sure if that was intentional or not), *Blank* revolves around high school junior Aki Clark and her misadventures with the eponymous Blank, a self-proclaimed secret agent who claims to be assigned to protect Aki. One problem—he can't remember anything else about his life, not even his name —hence the "blank."

Blank's mission to stick as close to Aki as a too-tight sweater suits the horny teenager just fine. Mhan has mastered the art of depicting the manga pervert. Blank gets liberally pummeled by Aki (and others) as readers get treated to generous fan service, another manga staple. The repeated beatings somehow endear him to Aki, and eventually it turns out that Blank may actually be needed to save her after all.

Blank feels in places like a cheap imitation of some of the most well-known elements of manga: its visual style, big-eyed characters, and a hero who survives endless beatdowns from nubile young women. However, it also contains the beginnings of the less obvious ones—a dedication to character and plot, a sense of timing and space—that make it worth reading, despite some rough edges.

Read it if... You like fan service of the western kind.



2006 TOP 25 DVDS

01. Cars
02. Corpse Bride
03. Howls Moving Castle
04. V For Vendetta
05. The Boondocks the complete first season
06. Talladega Nights
07. Nacho Libre
08. Gorillaz Demon Days
09. FF VII Advent Children
10. Lady in the Water
11. Chronicles of Narnia
12. Miami Vice
13. Mirror Mask
14. Brick
15. A History of Violence
16. Munich
17. Lord of War
18. Silent Hill
19. Monster House
20. Over the Hedge
21. Mi III
22. King Kong
23. South Park season 7
24. Ren & Stimpy: The Lost Episodes
25. Pirates of the Caribbean Dead Mans Chest

[redacted]
editor-in-chief

The inconceivable talent and dedication that brought *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* to life is to me what the movies are all about. It's as much a gift as it is a hauntingly beautiful tale. Animation on the whole had a spectacular year. From the wizardry of *Cars* and *MirrorMask* to the awe inspiring animation of Miyazaki, movie magic is alive and well. From TV Land the *Boondocks, South Park*, and *Ren & Stimpy* kept me smiling and *Talladega Nights* and *Nacho Libre* left an indelible poop stain on a great year for comedy. Elsewhere Demon Days lifted my spirits and The Wachowski's, strange as they may be, bestowed upon us yet another masterpiece.

BRADY FECHTER
senior editor

The best movies of this year are still on the way to DVD—*The Departed, Babel* and *Pan's Labyrinth,* to name a few—but while I'm waiting for the year-end greats, let's reflect on one movie that played on a different note than what we're used to: *Mirror Mask*. What a surprise this movie was, intoxicating with its magical visions and delightful fairy-tale whimsy. On repeat viewings, I appreciate it even more. And the same goes for *Cars* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, which both may not be the top of the Pixar and Miyazaki works, but soar in their own right.

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BACK OF THE BOOK

02_07 GREG ORLANDO
SENIOR EDITOR

Stark Raving Ad...

To be frank, there's not enough advertising space on my body to bring in the lucrative payments I'm seeking. I was thinking, you see, of renting out portions of my body as a billboard, but I am simply neither tall enough nor wide enough to make the sort of cash sufficient for me to retire to Hawaii, live in a solid-gold house, and eventually use the remaining millions as embalming fluid for my corpse.

I could, conceivably, work out or fatten up enough to eke out a small existence as a whore to commerce, but that reeks, surely, of effort. There is only one real option for me: commercial sponsorship of this very column.

In this vein, I have sent the following note to anyone I think might want to send me a check in order to sponsor this particular screed: Coke, Pepsi, RC Cola, Ralston-Purina, the Republican party of the United States of America, the Democratic party of the United States of America, Nike, Apple, Microsoft, Sony, Nintendo, Kraft Foods, Yahoo!, Google, MTV, those people keep trying to get me to join up for the U.S. Army, WWE, and Dominos Pizza.

The text of the letter reads thusly:

Dear Sir or Madam:

You are, no doubt, either seeking new avenues for promotion of your business/service/political party/armed service, or else you are in the employ of persons seeking such. Well, you may look no further, as I wish to present you with a unique opportunity to sponsor Play Magazine's "Back of the Book" column.

My name is Gregory Orlando, and I will be writing this particular column. Play Magazine is a monthly publication offered nationwide and with a circulation of, say, 30 squintillion copies. The magazine covers video games, anime, manga, and movies; it uses only the finest-quality paper harvested from environment-friendly tree farms.

Your monies, once the check clears, would ensure that your company/business/what-have you is the *Official Sponsor of Play Magazine's Back of the Book Column (For February).* I would gladly, then, compare your product and organization to a day at Disneyland or that first delicious puff from a Marlboro cigarette, whichever you prefer. I would also suggest that anyone who dislikes your product or service is vaguely untrustworthy, or perhaps mentally deficient in some way.

I also offer in-column advertising opportunities. For a nominal fee, I might be persuaded to mention that sitting in front of a computer for eight minutes to write a reasoned editorial is hard work and, at the conclusion of such, I would most surely enjoy an ice-cold Coca-Cola, which would itself be complemented by a piping-hot and topping-laden Domino's Pizza (which is, in fact, the Lamborghini of pizza). Think of the possibilities!

Your advertisements have already begun to infiltrate the great mass of video games, so why not expand your marketing to include notices placed directly in editorials based on the games themselves?

Burger King, which, aside from laying the foundations for deliciousness, has already plunked down the gross national product of Lower Eastern Grambia* to ensure Electronic Arts' Fight Night Round 3 included its ever-present mascot in the game; a delicious prospect the mere thought of which makes a man hungry for two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame-seed bun. It was an expensive effort, mind you, but well worth it. My understanding, of course, is that it would be considerably cheaper to put the Burger King in this editorial than insert him into a video game ...

I look forward to cashing each and every check, and may the highest bidder win my love, affection, and art.

Please send all funds to:
Gregory Orlando
In care of: Play Magazine
29229 Canwood St. Suite 200
Agoura Hills, Ca
91362

Sincerely,
Gregory Orlando

* P.S.: Lower Eastern Grambia is not a real country.

With luck, my bank account will fatten while my integrity shrivels. I can guarantee, however, that any $$$ I receive will be put to good use: mine.

It's genuinely hard to rail against anyone for seeking money. We all love cash, whether it's hording it, bathing in it while cackling like a supervillain, or tying it on the end of fishing poles and using it as bait to lure unwary people into falling into open sewer holes. But when game companies accept copious in-game advertisements, they're clearly putting the bottom line over art.

That's not wholly evil, either, even if it is disappointing. It's just hard to accept an artistic statement that compromises itself for product placement. We'd wince if Holden ranted against the phonies while making a pilgrimage to In and Out Burger for a double-double or if the Thinker was pontificating over a Starbucks grande mochalattechino. Or maybe it's just that games aren't an artistic statement at all, but a throwaway medium for a throwaway era of human history; an issue, certainly, for another column.

"I could, conceivably, work out or fatten up enough to eke out a small existence as a whore to commerce, but that reeks, surely, of effort."

What is wrong, purely wrong, however, is the corporate deflection, the sort of Newspeak wherein the game companies claim in-game advertising increases the realism of their titles, serves as a mechanism to keep development costs down, and is, in fact, a welcome addition. This is all burnished nonsense.

Including Dunlop tires, sweet Vulcanized rubber perfection though they may be, does not make your racing game true-to-life. Game companies are equating logos with realism? Go ahead, then, and slap that Dunlop logo prominently on the chests of those creepy, doll-like things infesting Dead or Alive Xtreme 2. I could use a special, overly endowed someone to celebrate my great in-game victories with copious amounts of jumping.

As long as corporate executives have pockets to line, no monies gained from advertisements will ever influence the price of a game title not sold at a burger franchise. The idea that in-game ads will ultimately serve to reduce software prices is, much like Ashlee Simpson's talent or Hillary Clinton's charisma, a carefully constructed myth. It's the new Brooklyn Bridge ready to be sold.

Worst of all may be the notion that game fans crave ads, and are welcoming the intrusion. People are bombarded with ads at every turn, and it's more than a little gross that advertisers are not satisfied with owning the masses for roughly 94 percent of their waking hours. There used to be an escape from the endless commercialism in movies and games and literature. Now, going to see a matinee means dropping about $8 or so to sit and watch two hours' worth of product placements. Game companies have taken notice, and they smell green. Lots of it.

In selling out we trust.

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Greg Orlando truly is the apex of deliciousness. It is his fondest wish to punch Atomic Superhitler in the stomach, possibly in a post-apocalyptic world wherein socks wear people and nothing is ever what it seems.

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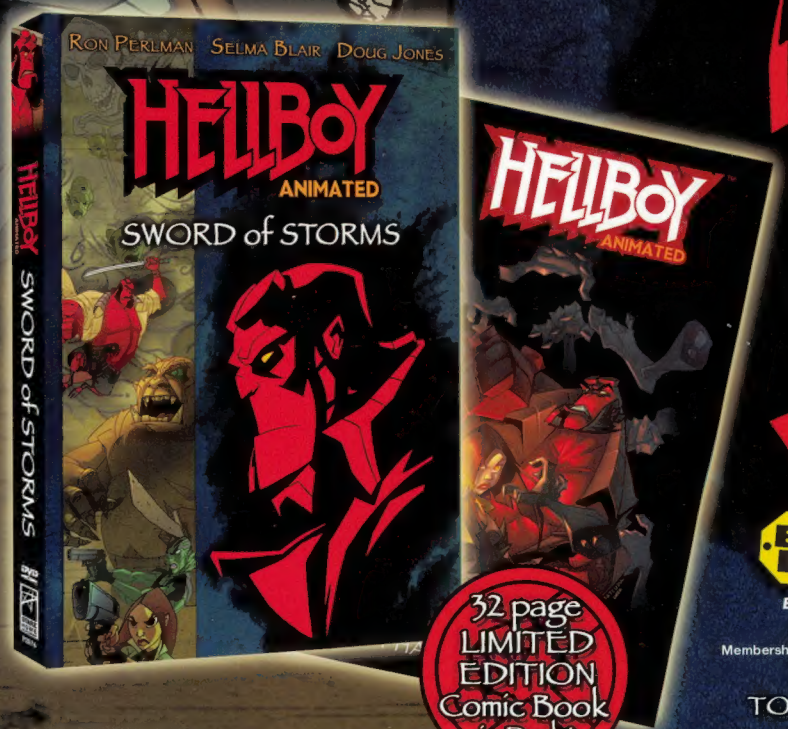

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